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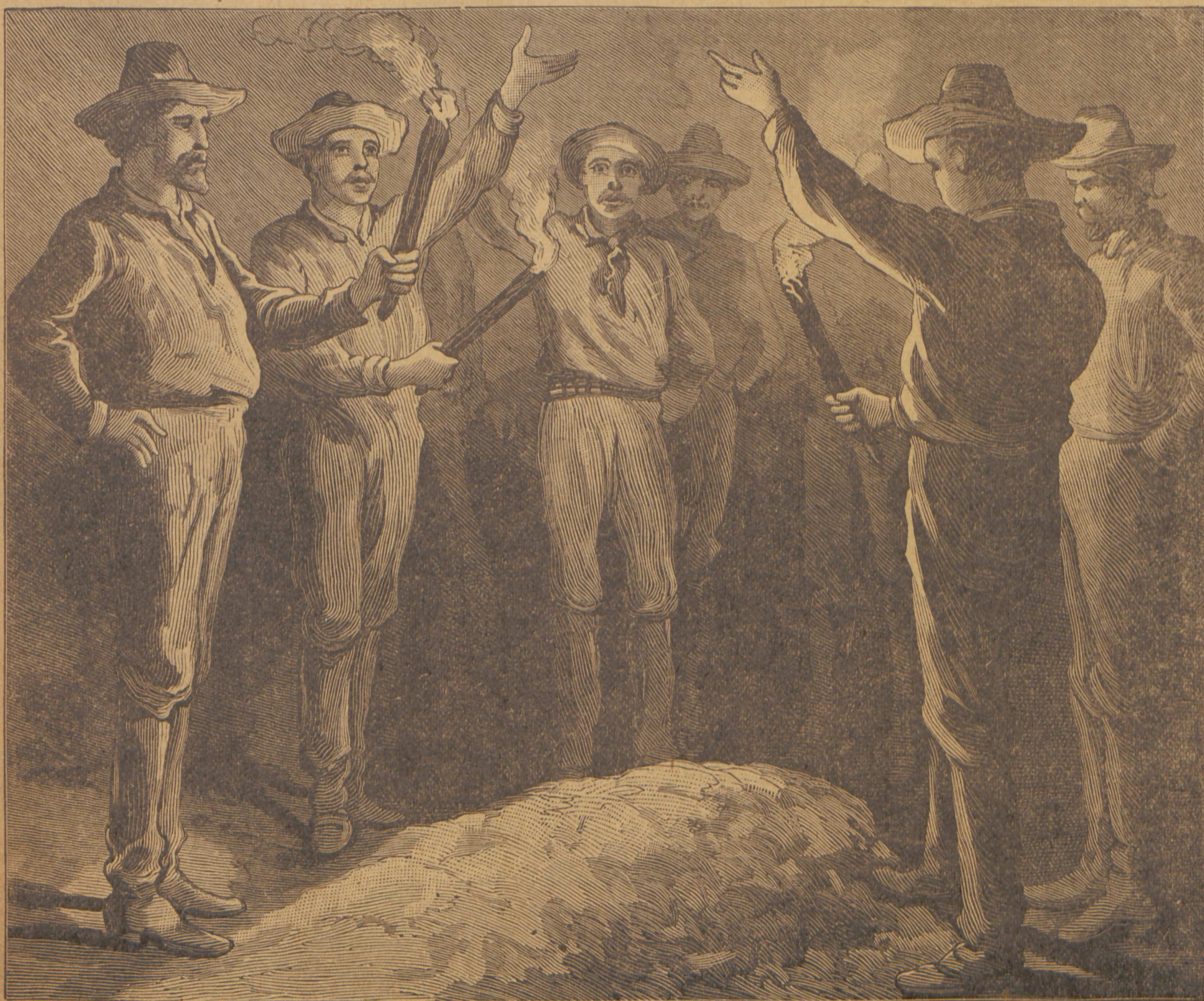
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Vol. XL.

BY
Wm. W. Wilder.

COWBOY CHRIS,

THE
Man of Caliber.



A MUTTERING THAT SWELLED LOUDER AND LOUDER UNTIL IT BECAME A HOARSE CRY FOR VENGEANCE.

Cowboy Chris, THE MAN OF CALIBER;

OR,

HOT TIMES IN HOT HOLE.

A Romance of Ranch, Range and Road Rovers.

BY WM. WEST WILDER,
("WYOMING WILL.")

CHAPTER I.

A RACKET IN THE WHOA EMMA.

THE rattling music of a banjo came from within the "Whoa Emma," the principal saloon of the New Mexican mining-camp of Hot Hole. It was a midsummer evening, and the doors and windows of the saloon were standing wide open, for the night was sultry. Now and then a whoop of delight told of the satisfaction with which some hilarious individual received the music.

Hot Hole was a new town of the San Juan Valley in the northwestern part of the Territory, but, as its name indicated, it was a very warm place, figuratively speaking. A glance at the throng gathered within the Whoa Emma would have revealed the fact that the inhabitants of the camp comprised all classes to be found in the wild Southwest.

The room was filled with miners, speculators, adventurers, cowboys and gamblers, and many wanderers and outcasts of different nations jostled each other in the throng. The common ruffian was there, as well as the finer-grained criminal whom the law had compelled to flee from "the States."

The bar was doing a lively business, for the heat seemed to make the motley assembly very thirsty. As it was yet early in the evening, there were no games in progress at the card-tables, and the faro lay-out had not opened for the night's run.

The greater part of the crowd was assembled near the point from which came the lively music. The musician was a coal-black negro of uncertain age, whose black face was covered by perspiration and a look of jolly good-nature. His dark fingers ran over the strings in a manner that, as one admiring fellow observed, "fairly made 'em talk."

"Who'da!" he snickered, shaking his woolly head and showing his white teeth in a grin as he doubled over the instrument. "Dis is w'at mecks yo' feet mighty onstiddy, chilluns! Yo' jes' cayn't keep 'em from jiggerin'."

And in proof of his words, half a hundred feet were unconsciously keeping time to the music.

Suddenly he ended with a rattling bang, flipped his banjo bottom side up and extended it for contributions.

"Jes' be kind ob free-hearted, gemmans," he said, "an' I'll gib yo' a song."

The donations being found satisfactory, he immediately fingered the strings again to make sure they were in perfect tune, then, in a delightfully melodious voice, rendered the following characteristic darky melody:

"Come along, niggers, an' git on de ship
Dat sails fo' de Golden Sho';
If yo' ain't mighty spry, it'll gib yo' de slip
An' nebber com' back any mo';
She hab h'isted up de sails an' waits fo' de breeze
To carry her off on de sea,
De crew ob de ship am down on deyr knees
To pray fo' de great jubilee.

"Oh! pack up yo' grip an' git on de ship
Dat sails fo' de Golden Sho';
W'en dey pulls in de plank, if yo's lef' on de bank,
It nebber comes back any mo'."

"Rush along, niggers, an' don't be too late
To git on de big wide deck;
De debbil am a watchin' to know yo' fate,
He hope dat de ship will wreck;
But de good ole craft am safe an' strong
To sail on de silver sea,
An' dem on de bote won't wait berry long
To sing in de great jubilee.

"Oh! pack up yo' grip an' git on de ship
Dat sails fo' de Golden Sho';
W'en dey pulls in de plank, if yo's lef' on de bank,
It nebber comes back any mo'."

The song was greeted with rounds of applause, which delighted the colored minstrel.

"You're a dandy, Pete!" cried one of the crowd.

"Arr!" growled a big, broad-shouldered tough, called "Whisky Jim," "thet's all ther

nigger's good fer. He don't know northin' but jest ter play ther banjo an' sing. He's er reg'ler jackass."

"I'se allus heard dat a jackass could be tole by his brayin'," was the darky's ready reply. "Yo' jes' better look mighty sharp or some'uns 'll be puttin' a halter roun' yo' neck."

The blear-eyed ruffian strode forward a pace and glared at the negro, as he demanded:

"W'at d'yer mean by thet, you black son of a guna?"

Pete closed one eye and gazed at Whisky Jim in a comical manner with the other.

"Say, boss," he whispered, loud enough for the men gathered around to hear, "jes' yo' keep still, an' I'll nebber gib it away. But yo'd bes' be kind ob keerful; ur w'en dey git de halter roun' yo' neck dey'll hitch yo' ter a tree-limb 'bout eight foot from de groun'. If de halter wur kind ob short, it might choke yo' powerful bad."

A snarl of fury came from the ruffian's bearded lips.

"I'd a good mine ter putter bullet through your thick skull!" he howled.

But the negro did not seem a bit frightened. He grinned in the most cheerful manner imaginable, as he retorted:

"If yo' done dat, I'd ha'nt yo' atter I wur dead, an' I 'lows by de color ob yo' nose, dat sperrits am troublin' yo' righteous bad now. Dat bugle ob yo's am a reg'ler danger-signal."

Whisky Jim would have drawn a revolver, but a hand on his wrist prevented, and a voice whispered in his ear:

"Ther boss says not ter git in a row with ther nigger. Pare down, pard!"

The half-intoxicated tough turned toward the speaker, his hand falling from the butt of the revolver.

"Hello, Mike," he said. "Is this you? I hain't seen you fer three days. Putt her thar!"

The two clasped hands, and as they stood near the center of the circle, they presented a fair representation of the coarser and more brutal toughs of the Southwest border.

Whisky Jim and Nevada Mike bore unsavory reputations in Hot Hole, where they were feared and avoided, as desperadoes of the lowest type. Common rogues steered clear of these ruffians, who had sunk so low in the scale of humanity that they were but little above the beasts. The self-styled "bad men" of the camp were fain not to boast when the "Twin Toughs" were present. As for the respectable citizens of the new town, they were not powerful enough to rise up and purge the place of its "undesirable" characters.

Standing upon a table at the outer side of the circle and enabled from their elevated position to look over upon the colored musician was a young "tenderfoot," and a squat, bow-legged cowboy. The tenderfoot, being hot-blooded and impulsive as he was fresh from the East, had been on the point of leaping down and forcing his way into the circle when the negro was threatened by Whisky Jim, but the horny hand of the cowboy had restrained him.

"Slow an' stiddy, boy," cautioned the old cow-puncher. "Thet hain't none o' your funeral."

"But that big wretch may take it into his head to shoot the negro!" somewhat excitedly retorted the youth. "Do you suppose I am going to stand by and see anything of that kind?"

"Woof!" snorted the veteran of saddle and lariat. "Ef you make a break I'll hev ter rope ye. I don't know ye frum a side o' sole-leather an' I hain't spotted yer brand, but I do know ye're a tenderfut, an' thet's ernough. Whisky Jim 'd think it fun ter lay ye out fer his private graveyard, an' ye hain't got no frien's hyer ter call ther big galoot ter er settlement."

The young man drew his tall figure up to its full height and squared his broad shoulders.

"I am not a baby, if I am a tenderfoot," he retorted. "You are not my guardian, so—"

"Now, don't go off at hafe-cock! I'm Round-up Rube, an' I'm goin' ter be yer frien', 'cause you makes me think o' Chris, an' Chris wuz er tenderfut w'en I fu'st saw him. Jest looker hyer. I've got a gun in my han' an' I'm keepin' my telescopes on Whisky James. Ef he tries ter spot ther nigger, I'll hev ter throw him cold, though I'd hate powerful ter git his gang atter me."

The bow-legged cowboy lifted his right hand and revealed the fact that it held a cocked revolver.

The young tenderfoot was not pleased by Round-up Rube's interference, but the advent of Nevada Mike on the scene made it unnecessary for any one to defend the colored musician,

so he remained on the table and watched what followed.

"Strike up a lively chune, Whitewash," cried Mike. "Make ther ole banjo howl, an' watch me an' Jim shake a fut."

The good-natured darky instantly complied, and, a moment later, the two toughs were dancing in an awkward but decidedly lively fashion, the stamping of their heavy boots making a terrific racket.

"Keerful dar, keerful dar!" warned Pete, as he rattled the strings. "Jes' tread a leetle sofer, chilluns, ur yo'll bre'k do'n de flo'. Yi—yil! Jes' see dat feller's lef' fut! Dat fut b'long to de church fo' suah! Cayn't seem ter keep up wid de odder nobow. Oh, wake up dar, whut yo' 'bout! Yo' 's bofe goin' to sleep!"

In a few moments the crowd was laughing and cheering the same as before Whisky Jim's appearance.

"Thet lets me out," observed Round-up Rube, as he restored his revolver to its holster. "I didn't want ter salt ther critter, fer I hain't no keer ter got Lightfinger Flip arter me."

"Who is Lightfinger Flip?" asked the tenderfoot.

"He's ther boss o' them two Mavericks, an' er mighty bad man he is—you hear me! Smooth an' slick as grease, but he'd as lief cut a throat as eat."

"Why do they call him Lightfinger Flip?"

"He makes his boodle at keerds an' in other crooked ways. His fingers are derved handy with ther pasteboards, an' thet's how he got his handle. But, w'at might your name be, boy?"

The youth hesitated a moment, then replied:

"You may call me Fred Walker."

A queer look passed over the cowboy's weather-beaten face.

"But thet hain't yer right handle, boy. All ther same, I don't mind. Thar's lots o' people out hyer thet don't go by their right names. As I said afore, I kinder take ter you, 'cause you make me think o' Chris. Not thet yer face looks like his, but you are built 'bout ther same an' you'se a tenderfut same as he wuz ther fu'st time we run ag'in' each other."

"Who is this Chris you speak of?"

"Nobody knows his other name, fer he won't tell it, so we calls him Cowboy Chris now. Some o' ther lads hev gi'n him ther title o' ther Man o' Caliber, though he hain't a bit older'n you, I reckon. But, he's er man all ther same, ev'ry inch o' him, an' I'm proud ter say he's my pupil with ther rope an' gun. Ther boys says I'm allus talkin' 'bout Chris, but I can't help it. We both b'long over on ther Robinson Ranch, but I'm off now on a leetle bim. Hev bin away fer two weeks, but I can't 'member much o' anythin' as happened ther fu'st week. I'm poorty well sobered off now, an' I'm goin' ter strike back ter-morrer ur next day. I'm gittin' kinder anxious ter see my boy ag'in, though I know he'll giv me a blessed goin' over."

"How is that?"

"Waal, ye see, we swore off tergeth—said we'd never tetch another drap. I did it fer his sake, fer he's young an' ther rotten stuff'd be his ruin ef he monkeyed with it. Now I've bin an' broke ther pledge. I'm durned 'shamed, but thet won't mend it. I hope Chris'll giv me ther all-fireddest larrupin' I ever got—an' he kin do it!" finished the old cowboy, making the confession with positive delight.

At this moment there was a sudden commotion caused by the appearance of a tall, broad-shouldered man who wore no hat on his head and whose long hair and beard, thickly sprinkled with gray, gave him an awe-inspiring appearance. Straight toward the point from whence came the music he strode, and the crowd fell back before him, a score of voices crying:

"It is Old Rattlebrain!"

CHAPTER II.

"ANDY 'ARRY HOF LUNNON."

THE young Easterner who stood on the deal-table with Round-up Rube was startled as he saw the wild light which flashed from the eyes of the new-comer in the saloon.

"Great Scott!" he muttered. "The man is crazy!"

"Hit it plumb center fu'st shot!" nodded the bow-legged cowboy. "Thet's w'y he's called Ole Rattlebrain. 'Tain't very often he comes inter town, but w'en he does, he generally runs things jest as he derved pleases. Ever'buddy seems afraid o' him, even ter ther Twin Toughs an' ther master, Lightfinger Flip."

Some of the crowd did not succeed in getting out of the strange man's way quick enough to please him and he caught them by the shoulders, hurling them aside as if they were children.

Neither of the Twin Toughs saw the crazy man till they felt his grasp upon their shoulders.

"Ho, ho!" he laughed, in a heavy, musical voice, as he held the astonished ruffians at arm's length and glared at them. "Two devil's whelps making merry, eh? Dancing, were ye? Well, you will both have a chance to dance on red-hot coals when you get your just deserts."

The darky had ceased playing at this interruption, but the strange man turned toward him, commanding:

"Go on ag'in and we will show you how to dance. Rattle it off lively now!"

"Great ginger!" exclaimed Pete. "If do Ole Boy hisself hain't gwine ter shake a hoof! Here goes."

Once more he struck into a lively tune, and immediately Old Rattlebrain began to dance, at the same time crying out to the two toughs:

"Break it down, you offsprings of sin! Dance for all you are worth, if you do not want to start on a quick trip to your master in less than a minute! The one who holds out the longest is the best man."

The ruffians did not dare disobey, even though they called themselves the "chiefs" of Hot Hole. They knew and feared the crazy man whose clutch they had felt. There was something in Old Rattlebrain's fiery eyes that made the bold-est of them all quail.

So Whisky Jim and Nevada Mike began dancing again, spurred on by the savage command of the strange man. Again and again he ordered them to quicken their pace, while he handled his feet as if filled with a furious frenzy. At the first glance, the spectacle was extremely ridiculous, but, for all of that, there was something about it that gave the spectators a feeling of awe and dread. The face and blazing eyes of the insane man were sufficient to cause the blood to chill in the veins of him who looked on them.

The crowd did not laugh, though some uttered suppressed oaths and shrunk further back from the dancing trio. It was impossible to tell what wild freak might seize upon the deranged man next, and many considered it discreet to be well beyond the clutch of his terribly powerful hand.

The darky musician closed his eyes as he doubled over the instrument, making it plain he did not care to look on Old Rattlebrain's face.

"W'at d'yer think o' that, boy?" whispered Round-up Rube, in Fred Walker's ear.

"I am beginning to believe I have fallen into a nest of cracked-brains," was the almost contemptuous reply. "I have heard considerable of the 'wild and woolly West,' but I never dreamed of such things as these. But that old man's eyes give me the shakes. He ought to be in some lunatic asylum."

"He is harmless ez er kitten ef ye lets him hev his own way. But he's er holy horror ef ye rubs his fur ag'in' ther grain. Long Knife Ike tried ter jump him with er sticker, but Ole Rattlebrain caught his wrist. Then he jest caught holt o' Ike in some way an' broke his neck like it wuz er pipe-stem. Ike wuz burried at ther town's expense, an' Ole Rattlebrain wuz offered a vote o' thanks fer savin' Jedge Lynch er job."

"But who is this Old Rattlebrain?"

"Nobody knows, boy. He don't know hisself. It is a mystery whar he lives, an' how he lives. Nobody ever saw him kerry ary weapon 'sides them natur' giv' him. He comes inter Hot Hole w'en he likes, an' nobody's dared foller him w'en he leaves."

"What made him insane?"

"Now ye're axin' another bad 'un. I've heerd say as how he sometimes tells ther he wuz thumped on ther head by a galoot as robbed him o' his pile, but I dunno how true ther yarn is."

"Hello, thar's Lightfinger Flip now!"

The cowboy pointed toward a tall, dark-faced man of middle age, who was standing at one side of the circle, smoking a cigar as he watched the singular spectacle of the three men dancing to the music of the banjo. He was quite as tastily dressed as a city swell, and he had the air of a man of the world; but something in his appearance instantly prejudiced the young tenderfoot against him.

Within the circle the wild dance continued till both of the Twin Toughs were exhausted; but when they would have stopped, Old Rattlebrain caught them by the collars and fairly yelled:

"Dance, you devils, dance!"

But at length they were so far used up that they could no longer keep in motion. Then, stooping suddenly, the maniac caught them both by the belts and lifted them off their feet, swinging them at arm's length above his bare head. It was a feat that caused the witnesses to gasp with astonishment and dismay, while

gurgling cries of fear came from the lips of the ruffians thus held aloft.

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Fred Walker. "That man must have the strength of a Samson! He would be a match for a dozen common men!"

"Ho, ho, ho!" laughed Old Rattlebrain, as he continued to keep time to the music. "This is ther way Satan will handle ye when he gets his claws on ye!"

A low exclamation broke from Round-up Rube's lips, and once more the bow-legged cowboy drew his revolver, his eyes fastened on the gambler, Lightfinger Flip. The dark-faced card-sharp had also reached for a weapon, and seemed on the point of taking a snap-shot at the Hercules maniac.

But, suddenly, Old Rattlebrain lowered the Twin Toughs to the floor unharmed. Then he pressed his broad hands to his head, and the fire seemed to die out of his eyes. He gazed around as if dazed, his lips moved, and from the midst of his beard came a few broken words:

"Yes, Nancy—I'm coming—home. I have the—gold—the—gold. I'm—coming—home."

His hands fell at his sides and he stared wonderingly at the crowd for several moments, then he turned and strode from the room, almost brushing against Lightfinger Flip as he left the circle. Nobody noticed that the gambler stared strangely at the madman, the color having left his dusky face till it was of an ashen hue.

Barely had Old Rattlebrain passed through the open doorway when a person of quite a different appearance entered the saloon.

"Holy smoke!"

"Looker thar!"

"W'at is it?"

"A dood, by thunder!"

The new-comer was a stranger in camp, and he might have hesitated about wandering into the Whoa Emma if he had known what a reception he would receive. He was dressed in a plaid suit, the figure being the very "loudest" thing imaginable. There were patent-leathers on his feet; he wore a white shirt and collar—a portion of the former being concealed by a flaming red necktie. Upon his head was set a silk hat of the latest style, and in his hand he carried a gold-headed cane.

A step within the doorway the stranger paused to adjust an eyeglass and stare critically at the throng, after which he ventured to ask:

"Ham Hi in the saloon, you know?"

A moment of silence followed the query; then a perfect roar broke from the crowd and a general rush was made for the stranger. In a moment he was surrounded by the laughing throng, everything else being forgotten as they examined the startled "dood."

"W'at kin it be?" asked one fellow as he walked around the new-comer and surveyed him from head to foot.

"Looker thet hat!" cried another, half-squatting with his hands on his knees, as he gazed up at the strangers' beautifully polished tile.

"Keerful! Don't putt yer han's on it, fer it may break!"

"Velly much 'Mellican lulu!" commented a Chinaman.

"Begorra!" shouted an Irishman. "Oi thort I c'd tell a jackass whin Oi saw it, but this wan hasn't any ears t' spake av at all, at all!"

"Lawsee me!" grinned the darky musician, who had been swept along with the crowd. "If I jes' had dem togs, I knows a yaller gal dat I'd break de heart ob fo' suab."

The stranger drew himself up with great dignity and gazed scornfully at the crowd.

"Hi would 'ave you hunderstand," he said, sharply, "that Hi ham an Henglish gentleman. Hi ham a sport, ye know. My name is 'Andy 'Arry, hand Hi ham from Lunnon."

CHAPTER III.

COWBOY CHRIS CHIPS IN.

A shout of delight came from the throng.

"Oh, git haway 'ere!" cried one fellow, imitating the Englishman's manner of expression.

"This is an Henglish sport, ye know."

"By golly!" laughed the darky. "Dat feller wears single-barreled spectacles! I jes' reckum he mus' be bline in his off eye."

"He go dead bloke on togs," observed the Chinaman. "No havee clash to gitee bloth glasses, gitee one."

"G'lorrng, ye haythen!" cried the Irishman. "He ounly wears wan glass t' privent him from seeing double whin he looks at sick craythers as yez."

Having recovered their breath in a measure, the Twin Toughs pushed their way to the center

of the circle and confronted the dandy Englishman.

"Waal, I want ter go ter Hel-ena!" growled Whisky Jim, after surveying the stranger from head to foot.

"Say," called Nevada Mike, crouching a bit and peering up into the Englishman's face, "duz yer mammy know yer out, sonny?"

'Andy 'Arry fell back a step in evident consternation, lifting his cane and shaking it warningly, as he cried:

"Ave a care, you bloomin' bloody blokes! Hi ham not a man to take hany hof your chaff!"

This caused another shout of merriment.

"Holy Ham, son of Noah!" cried Nevada Mike. "These be degenerous days w'en er critter like this kin roam about without bein' killed!"

"Mike," said Jim, soberly, "I 'low it's our 'lireous duty ter shoot this thing through the head."

"I reckon you're right, pard. It's liable ter skeer some pore cuss inter a fit ef we let it run loose any longer."

Round-up Rube and Fred Walker were in the outskirts of the crowd, but they plainly heard the words of the two toughs. The young Easterner became somewhat excited.

"They are going to kill that unlucky devil!" he exclaimed.

"Waal, I guess not!" laughed the bow-legged cowboy. "Thet's all bluff. They are only skeerin' him. Ther next thing, they'll be strikin' him fer a drink. Jest keep yer shirt on, boy, you'll git ust ter ther ways o' ther kentry atter a while."

But the Twins were not destined to get a drink out of the Englishman.

The gambler, Lightfinger Flip, pushed his way to the center of the throng, the men falling back for him to pass.

"Here, here, boys!" he said, sternly, looking at his two tools. "Don't you know a gentleman when you see one? Get out!"

Jim and Mike gave him looks of surprise, but immediately fell back.

"Now," said Round-up Rube, nudging Fred Walker with his elbow, "thet cuss is up ter some kind o' er game. He is more danger'us fer ther greeny then ther Twins. I tell you he's bad med'cine!"

"I am happy to meet you, sir," said the card-sharp, lifting his hat and offering his hand.

"Aw!" was 'Andy 'Arry's response, as he took the proffered hand. "The same to yourself, b'Jove! Hi ham hastounded to meet a gentleman in this hinfarnal country, ye know! Dooood hagreeable thing, Hi hassure you!"

"Oh, you mustn't mind these fellows," and Flip nodded toward the crowd. "They do not mean any harm. This is one of the most harmless and peaceable towns you ever struck."

"Well, Hi ham glad to 'ear bit, for Hi 'ad begun to think differently."

"I take it you are from across the pond? You have the air of a London gentleman."

At this a flattered smile spread over 'Arry's face, and he quite seemed to forget he had made the statement that he was from "Lunnon."

"Hit is plain you 'ave been haround the world some," he said, "for you 'ave it hit right the first go. Lunnon is me 'ome."

"Ah! Traveling for your health or for pleasure?"

"For 'ealth, pleasure hand business."

"That makes an excellent combination, for most poor devils on this side have to travel for ther health when they travel at all. But, it is very warm. Would you honor me by taking something with me?"

"That is what Hi came in 'ere for, hand Hi ham glad to 'ave found an hagreeable companion to drink with."

The gambler locked arms with the English dandy, and the two passed out of the thickest of the crowd, and made their way toward an empty table.

"Flip hes got his claws on thet pore sucker, an' he'll skin him clean afore he takes 'em off," said Round-up Rube to his new-found tenderfoot friend. "Ther pore fool hes tumbled right inter ther soup fu'st flop."

The gambler ordered liquor and glasses, and half an hour later the man from London and the Southwest sport were engaged in a game of draw poke. The crowd gathered around to witness the fun.

"Hi never saw such people to play poker as you bloomin' Hamericans hare!" declared 'Arry. "Hi do not know much habout the game, but Hi 'ave not been hable to get hinto hany other kind hof a game since Hi came hover. As a result, b'Jove! Hi 'ave 'ad to cable me Lunnon bankers for money twice. Hif Hi could honly strike a

game hof whist with a 'igh stake, Hi would be 'appy."

"Poker does seem to be the great American game," acknowledged Flip, as he deftly shuffled and dealt the cards. "In fact, I do not know much about any other game, and I only play this for fun. But I like a good high limit, if there is any limit at all, then it can be made mighty interesting."

"Habout 'ow 'igh do you like the limit?"

"Well, say about as high as the sky."

'Andy 'Arry fell back and stared at the Southwest sport in astonishment.

"That is a little too 'igh for my knowledge hof the game," he confessed. "Habout a 'undred pounds will do me, ye knaw."

"Or, say five hundred American dollars?"

"Yes."

"Well, we will let it stand at that."

Round-up Rube and Fred Walker joined the crowd of spectators.

"You jes' keep your clothes on, whatever ye see, lad," advised the bow-legged cowboy. "It won't do ter git too fresh w'en Lightfinger Flip is around."

For a time the game ran along smoothly, neither of the players seeming to get much advantage.

"You play a pretty stiff and steady game for a man who pretends not to know much about it," declared Flip.

"Hi ham doing very well," acknowledged 'Arry. "But, there 'as been no 'eavy betting yet."

In a few moments there was some heavy betting, for both of the players seemed to get good hands, but Round-up Rube stood directly behind the Southwest sport and knew Flip was playing a game of bluff, as he only had one little pair in his hand.

But, 'Andy 'Arry was not to be bluffed, for he raised every bet with remarkable promptness.

"Hi ham in this pot my 'ole bigness," he declared, as he made a raise that took the full extent of the limit.

"I believe you are bluffing," asserted Lightfinger Flip, coolly counting out five hundred dollars and adding them to the pot. "I have seen men that played your game before."

"Well, whether you hare bluffing or not, you hare going to lose your wealth," laughed the "Lunnon" man, producing a fat pocketbook. "Hi will run this dry, hand then write me draft, b' Jove!"

Having made this declaration, he raised the pot the limit once more.

Lightfinger Flip laughed shortly.

"You have the right kind of blood," he acknowledged, flipping his cards face upward and revealing a pair of five spots. "It is useless to try to bluff you when you have a good hand. The pot is yours, but I would give something to see your cards."

"You can see them hand welcome," smiled 'Arry; and, having gathered in the stakes, he showed his hand.

A cry of amazement came from the crowd, and Lightfinger Flip stared at the cards in astonishment, his face becoming crimson with shame.

'Andy 'Arry had held a four-card flush and a pair of three-spots! The sport's five-spots would have been good had he called!

"Talk erbout bluff!" cried Round-up Rube. "Thet jest takes ther rag off ther bush!"

"I thought you said you did not know anything about this game," said Flip, settling back in his chair and staring at the "Lunnon" sport.

"Hi ham learning, dear sir," was the calm reply.

"Well, I should say so. But, the game is not ended yet. I will play this back on you with interest. No man can skin me in that way and carry off my money at the end."

Flip ran his eyes over the throng of faces gathered around, and as they met the orbs of one man, a signal unseen by others passed between them.

As the gambler picked up the cards and gave them a thorough rippling, Nevada Mike managed to make his way to a place directly behind the London man's chair.

The game continued.

"Next time," declared Lightfinger Flip, "I will be ready for you."

"Hand next time Hi will not be bluffing," was the retort.

But, the Englishman's luck seemed suddenly to turn. The dark-faced gambler began to win all the pots of consequence, with now and then the exception of a jack-pot. Whenever 'Arry would hold a good hand, Flip declined to bet, allowing the London man to rake in the stakes without a struggle.

"'Ave Hi frightened you so you do not dare do a bloomin' thing?" inquired the dandy Englishman.

"Well, not exactly," was the reply; "but I have decided to play a steady game and show you how little you really know of poker."

Finally there came a heavy jack-pot, and it fell to Flip to deal. He very deftly "put up" the cards, and when the Englishman "cut," he made the "pass" which restored the cards to their original position. The trick was very neatly done, and remained undetected by 'Arry—apparently.

"Now comes the tug of war," said Flip, grimly. "I feel as if one of us would have openers this time."

'Arry received four kings and the Southwest sport succeeded in securing two aces. However, he knew where the other aces lay, and they were not in the pack!

The pot was "opened," then 'Andy 'Arry stood "pat."

"Well, I reckon I am in for it this time," observed the dark-faced gambler, as he apparently took three cards from the pack. "Still," he added, not even glancing at the cards he had seemed to draw, "I am loaded for another bluff."

"Hi wonder hif you hare?" smiled the Englishman, screwing his glass into his eye and surveying his opponent critically. "Hif Hi should bluff, Hi suppose you would raise me hall summer."

"Well, you might try it on and see."

Two or three light bets were made, but they rapidly became larger till 'Arry went the limit.

"Well, now you hare got blood!" cried Flip, in apparent admiration. "I never before saw a man with so much gall on the bluff. Two to one you do not hold anything higher than a bob-tailed flush."

"You can 'ave the pleasure hof seeing them hif you see me hand call, ye knaw."

"I presume so; but, the fact is, I am going to boost you the limit."

"Which compels me to boost you back hagain."

Again and again did the players set each other the full extent of the limit. The spectators scented trouble, and many moved from the immediate vicinity.

Finally the London sport called.

"If you have a straight flush, I am beaten," said Flip, as he spread out his hand. "If not, the money is mine."

'Arry stared at the four aces exposed, consternation written on his face.

"Hi 'ave four kings," he finally acknowledged.

"Then the pot is mine," and Flip reached to rake it in.

"Hands off!" rung out a clear and commanding voice. "I hold the drop!"

At one side of the table stood a tall, broad-shouldered and long-haired young cowboy, a self-cocking revolver in each hand, the weapons being trained on the gambler of the dark face and his accomplice, Nevada Mike, who stood behind the London sport's chair.

"I have spotted the crooked game," declared the handsome young fellow who had thus unexpectedly chipped in. "A sleeve hold-out and a system of signals may be a pretty sure way to rob a man at cards, but lynching is too good for the skunks who work the game!"

"Hooray!" bellowed Round-up Rube, in delight. "Thet's Cowboy Chris as is talkin', an' w'en he speaks, he says sump'n', bet yer shirt!"

CHAPTER IV.

A TREACHEROUS SHOT.

"COWBOY CHRIS!"

Twenty voices uttered the name, for the young cattleman was well-known in Hot Hole.

But the most astounded man in the saloon was the young tenderfoot, Fred Walker. He stared a moment at the cowboy who had chipped into the game, then he fairly shouted:

"Chris Comstock, or his ghost!"

At the sound of Fred Walker's voice, the cowboy gave a great start and removed his eyes for an instant from the men beneath the muzzles of his revolvers. As he looked the tenderfoot fairly in the face, he uttered a hoarse cry and reeled back a step, his weather-browned face growing ashen gray.

Quick as thought, Lightfinger Flip's hand disappeared into one of the side pockets of the coat he wore. He did not stop to draw the weapon his nimble fingers grasped, but fired through the coat.

Providence was on Cowboy Chris's side then, for, although the gambler had once killed a man by shooting from his pocket, his bullet missed the mark for which it was intended that time.

But it found a living target just the same!

A cowboy who had entered the saloon with Chris and was standing a short distance behind him threw up his arms and fell to the floor without even uttering a groan!

'Andy 'Arry was not idle. He saw his chance to scoop the stakes—and he made the scoop.

The sudden turn things had taken threw the crowd into a panic and a general rush was made for the open doors and windows. Other shots rung out. There were shouts and oaths, a crashing of glass, and half the lights in the Whooa Emma were destroyed.

When something like order was restored, it was found that Lightfinger Flip and his two tools, Whisky Jim and Nevada Mike, had disappeared. The young tenderfoot, who was mainly the innocent cause of the break, having distracted the cowboy's attention and thus given the card-sharp a chance to perform his foul work, was also missing.

Cowboy Chris and Round-up Rube were bending over the unfortunate cattleman who had been stricken down by the treacherous gambler's bullet.

In attempting to escape to a place of safety, the "Lunnon" sport and Pete, the darky, had fled as far as the faro table, where they had collided, both falling to the floor and sliding under the table. The restoration of lights found them locked in each other's arms, Pete clinging desperately to his precious banjo and 'Andy 'Arry grasping a mass of coins and bank-notes in each hand.

"Wuffo' yo' do dat?" spluttered the negro, in anger. "Wuffo' yo' run kerchug ag'in' my bread-basket an' knocks me under dis yar table?"

"Oh, you bloomin' bloody nigger!" blurted the indignant Englishman, as soon as he could catch his breath. "Don't you know hany better than to collide with a gentleman in such an infernally violent manner. You hought to 'ave your black 'ead punched, b' Jove!"

"Mebbe yo' fink yo' 's able to do dat job?" and Pete glared at the Londoner without attempting to arise. "Jes' yo' try hit on an' see 'f I don' meck yo' sick! By golly! yo's completely upstot my interior arrangements! I's bettin' more dan sebeten ob my ribs am broke!"

"Hi wish your neck was broken!" groaned 'Arry as he made desperate efforts to untangle himself and get out from beneath the table. "Then hit could go hand keep company with my back. Hi never saw such an outrageous country hand such infernally hignorent people! W'are hare me 'at hand cane?"

As he crept from under the table, he discovered his hat beneath him, but the shining tile was crushed into an unshapely mass, and its beauty ruined forever. 'Arry gave a howl of despair as he saw it.

"Look at that 'at!" he raved, holding it up with one hand, having thrust his winnings into various pockets. "Hit cost me two pounds hin Bawston, b'Jove! Hand hit's spoiled hall on haccount hof an infernal black nigger!"

Having replaced his ruined hat upon his head, he began to groan and rub his back.

"Hit's a wonder Hi ham not dead!" he declared.

Pete crawled forth and arose to a stooping posture, but seemed unable to fully straighten up. In his right hand he clutched his banjo, which fortunately was uninjured, while he pressed his left hand upon his stomach.

"Hit's a drefful pity yo' am not dead!" he grunted, shortly. Hit would save de Fool-Killer a job! Oh, my gizzard! it's jes' plumb completely turned de wrong side ober!"

"But Hi got hof with the boodle, ye knaw!" chuckled 'Arry, a happy thought suddenly striking him. "That his henough to purchase two hor three 'ats."

"An' yo' 's kickin' 'cause yo' run ag'in' a pore cull'ed gemman lek me! Well, yo' oughter be 'shamed ob yo'se'f—yo' jes' had!"

The Englishman adjusted his eyeglass and surveyed Pete from head to foot, presenting a comical aspect as he did so, his clothes being covered with dust and his silk hat having a lop-sided cant on his head.

"Hi really 'ave to beg your pawdon," he smiled, in his sweetest manner. "Hi hassure you Hi did not see you. Hif Hi 'ad, Hi might 'ave saved myself a lame back. Hi 'ope you will hexcuse me?"

"Oh, dat's all right!" grinned the darky, his good-nature returning in an instant. "I jes' don' mine no small things lek dat! I's de boy

dat wur butted offen de bridge by de bull. I hab been run ober by de steam cayars an' blowed all toe flinters by a po'der-mill 'sposion. I don' mine a little fing lek dis at all. Don' mention hit, sar—don' mention hit!"

And thus peace was restored between them. Two minutes later, they marched up to the bar together.

Meantime, Cowboy Chris had been examining his comrade's injury.

"He has got it bad, poor fellow!" he muttered, shaking his head, soberly.

"That's er fac'," agreed Round-up Rube. "I reckon ther boy hes roped his last steer."

With a keen knife, Chris swiftly cut away the clothing over the bleeding wound.

"He is still alive, but the ball must have passed near his heart."

"An inch ur so above. It's gone clean through his left lung."

"Some one go for a doctor!" cried Chris. "Find Bob Bitters and bring him here lively! This man is dying!"

Two or three who had ventured back into the saloon promptly darted out at the door.

"How in blazes kem you hyer, boy?" asked the bow-legged cowboy, as he assisted Chris in staunching the flow of blood.

"Looking after you, Pard Rube. There are a dozen of the boys in town, but I reckon Jimson and I were the only ones who came in here. The others will hustle in when they learn what has happened."

"Ye'd best let me run; I'd turned up ter-morrer ur next day. Now pore Jim's got his eternal dost."

"Some of the boys who were over the first of the week said you were on a holy jamboree. We didn't know but you would get wild and try to take the town. It was voted to look out for you. Rube, Rube! have you forgotten your promise?"

The older cowboy hung his head with shame.

"No, I hain't fergot it, lad," he finally confessed; "but that thar devilsh hankerin' got holt o' me, an' I jest c'u'dn't seem to throw it off. I hed ter let off steam ur bu'st my b'iler wide open!"

"That is a poor excuse, Rube. You see your love of drink has caused Jack's death."

"How's thet, lad?" gasped the old cattleman, in amazement.

"If you had not been here, we should not have come after you. If we had not come after you, Jack would not have been here to catch the bullet intended for me."

Round-up Rube looked horrified and astounded. Finally, he muttered:

"Holy cats! That's er fac'! Great jizzling Moses! This is ther wu'st! Waal, I'm blowed!"

He stared down into Jimson's white and ghastly face for a few moments, and then, he said solemnly and earnestly, without a thought of profanity:

"I hope I may be eternally damned ef I ever tetch another drap o' ther cussid devil's broth!"

Cowboy Chris held out his hand.

"Put it there, pard! I, too, have seen enough of its infernal work. I hope God will give you strength to keep your pledge."

And above the body of their now softly moaning comrade they clasped hands.

"But, Chris, boy," said Rube, "w'at wuz it as knocked ye out so ye lost ther drap an' 'lowed ther p'ison skunk ter git a crack at ye from his pocket?"

The young cowboy started and stared searchingly around the room.

"It was that young man who spoke my name," he explained. "If that was not Fred Anthropol, it must have been his ghost!"

"He 'lowed ter me thet his name wuz Walker."

The appearance of Bob Bitters, the "doctor," interrupted further conversation. Several cowboys followed the physician into the saloon, having heard of their comrade's misfortune.

Under Bitters's direction, the wounded man was lifted and laid on several deal-tables, which had been pushed together. The doctor shook his head as he looked at the wound.

"Mighty bad!" he mumbled, producing a small leather case of instruments. "Small show! Reg'ler finisher! Tough case!"

The wounded man opened his eyes and gazed around him in a dazed manner, still moaning faintly. His comrades gathered near, pity written on their weather-beaten faces.

For several moments Bob Bitters bent over the unfortunate fellow, examining the wound and tracing the course of the bullet. Finally he straightened up, a settled look on his florid face.

"How is it?" asked Jimson, in a husky

whisper. "Tell me ther truth, Doc, how long kin I stan' it?"

"Mebbe an hour," was the repl. "Mebbe less."

CHAPTER V.

A STRANGE SCENE IN THE SALOON.

At this announcement the assembled cowboys, of which there were now about a dozen, showed much more emotion than did the doomed man himself. Round-up Rube grated out something that sounded like a bitter curse, driving the clinched fist of his right hand into the open palm of his left, as if he were dealing a death blow. Chris turned his face away, his eyes suddenly growing dim with a thick mist.

Jimson, next to Chris, had been the favorite on the Robinson Ranch. He was a mild man who never quarreled when he could avoid it and who had often succeeded in making peace between others who were enemies. As the cowpunchers expressed it, he was "square as er brick an' white ez whitewash." Despite his peaceable inclinations, he was known to be a brave man who never shirked a duty, and these virtues had made him respected and loved by his rough companions.

"It's all right, pards," assured Jimson, speaking in a low tone. "I reckon my time hes come an' ther Great Boss hes seen fit ter call me off duty. He looks atter us pore human critters, an' I hain't ther boy ter kick erg'in' w'at He 'lows is best."

Bob Bitters called for bandages and again dressed the wound as well as was possible, saying as he finished:

"Thet'll give ye thirty minutes more. Best I kin promise." Then he walked away toward the bar.

Jimson lifted his hand and motioned for his comrades to approach closer.

"I can't speak very loud, pards," he smiled, his voice sounding husky. "I'm mighty tired somehow. But I'm goin' ter hev er good long rest."

Some of the rude fellows choked in the struggle to keep back their tears.

Many of those who fled from the saloon a short time before had returned. Quite a crowd collected around the tables on which the dying man lay. It was nothing unusual for a man to be shot or stabbed to death in Hot Hole, but for some reason, Jimson's case seemed an exception. He had been slain by the bullet intended for another man. As if by general though unuttered agreement, those within the saloon moved about cautiously and spoke in subdued tones.

"Pards, I want ter shake with ye all afore I go," said the dying cowboy. "You hev bin good pards ter me an' I hain't got ary feelin' ag'in' none of ye. If ary man hes any feelin' ag'in' me, I want ter know it now, so we kin make it all right, fer ef we ever meet in ther Great Hereafter, we want ter meet with all ole scores settled."

"Thar hain't northin' any one c'u'd hev ag'in' ye, Jimmy boy," assured Round-up Rube.

"You needn't woorry about thet."

The dying man took Rube's hand.

"You've allus bin white, Rube," he declared.

"Ef it's possible an' I'm lucky enough ter go whar I kin, I'll speak a good word fer you."

The bow-legged cowboy suddenly broke down and sobbed as only a strong man can. He clung to his comrade's hand, vainly trying to say something which his emotion would not allow.

Finally, he lifted Jimson's fingers to his bearded lips.

"I tell ye it's all right, pard," murmured the dying cowboy. "I hain't makin' no kick."

"But I wuz all ther c use o' it!" groaned Rube, when he could find expression. "I'll never fergive myself! An' thet onery, murderous card-sharp—"

He stopped sharp, a black cloud settling over his face, as he dashed the tears aside with his sleeve.

One by one, the cowboys took Jimson's hand. He had a parting word for them all, and the tears trickled silently down the face of more than one time-hardened man.

Cowboy Chris came last. Jim grasped the young man's hand with both of his.

"Chris," he whispered, "I dunno jest why it is, but I love ye. You hev allus bin a faverite ever sence Rube brought ye ter ther ranch. All ther boys set by ye, an' thar hain't one but 'd die fightin' fer ye. You're white ter ther core, an' you are a hull man ef thet hair on yer upper lip hain't very long. You're nathin' but er boy, an' I'm an ole man. Ef ary one hed ter go, I 'low I wuz ther one. It wuz better fer me ter stop ther lead then fer you. My voice is gittin' mighty weak, lad."

Chris bent over the sinking man, and Jimson succeeded in passing one arm over the young man's neck.

"Pard," Jimson went on, "I want ter see ye at ther Great Round-up. I want ter see all ther boys thar. I don't reckon it's goin' ter be ther end of me w'en I die, but I'm mighty shore thar's suthin' arter death. God never putt us hyer jest ter live this wretched short life an' then die an' thet be ther eend of us. My ole mammy learned me thet, an' though she's bin in her grave thirty year, I hain't fergot it, God bless her!"

He paused to rest a moment, then continued, slowly:

"I hain't got nary kin ter hev w'at I've got, an' I'm goin' ter guv it all ter you. Ther bank book's in my inside pocket, an' I want all ther boys ter witness I make you my legal heir. Do ye witness, boys?"

"We witness," was the general response.

"Thet's all, lad," gasped Jimson. "I'm so tired!"

He closed his eyes for a few seconds, and every man breathed softly till he opened them again.

"Jim," said Chris, as steadily as he could, "what about the dog that shot you?"

"Vengeance is mine, saith ther Lord!"

"I'm goin' to see that he gets his just deserts," declared Chris. "He shall not escape!"

The dying man, with a great effort, threw off the stupor that was overcoming him.

"Chris, boy!" he gasped. "You mus'n't hev his blood on yer hand! Ef ther law can't do ther work, leave it ter God."

"He shall have a fair trial, if we can capture him. But, if he resists, we may have to snuff him out. We will give him a show."

"But, it'll be a cussed small show!" grated Round-up Rube, in an aside.

Once more Jimson sunk into a state of silence that seemed like death. His face was drawn and ghastly. After two or three minutes, he opened his eyes and looked around, then his lips moved, but Chris was obliged to bend over him to hear the words.

"He wants somebody to sing," explained the young cowboy, as he straightened up.

Pete, the ducky, pushed his way into the circle.

"I will sing fo' him," he said, softly, tears in his eyes.

The negro struck a few low chords on his banjo, then, to a mellow accompaniment, sung in a subdued tone the ducky melody of "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot." It was the strangest scene ever enacted in that den of gambling and iniquity. Men who had never before shed a tear since childhood wept softly as Pete's gently chanted song reached their heart and soothed the dying moments of the cowboy.

"I looked ober Jordan, an' w'at did I see,
Comin' fo' to kerry me home?
A ban' ob angels comin' arter me—
Comin' fo' to kerry me home.
Swing low, sweet chariot, comin' fo' to kerry me home;
Swing low, sweet chariot, comin' fo' to kerry me home.

"If yo' git dar befo' I do—
Comin' fo' to kerry me home,
Tell all my friens I'm comin' too—
Comin' fo' to kerry me home.
Swing low, sweet chariot, comin' fo' to kerry me home;
Swing low, sweet chariot, comin' fo' to kerry me home."

And as Pete sung, the soul of the dying man passed peacefully away, wafted on the wings of song into the dim aisles of the dead.

"He is gone!" solemnly announced Chris, peering into Jimson's pale face.

The tall form of Old Rattlebrain pushed its way through the throng and entered the circle.

"Let us pray," said the strange man—"let us pray to the Almighty God above."

He knelt down, and every cowboy followed his example, bowing their uncovered heads.

Then a strange sound arose within the saloon of that wild New Mexican mining-camp—the sound of a voice in prayer! Seldom is a more eloquent and touching prayer heard than that uttered by the mysterious man of the San Juan valley. It formed the climax of the strangest scene ever witnessed in Hot Hole.

When the prayer was finished, every cowboy said "Amen!" then they arose and stood around the silent form of their comrade.

"Brothers," came solemnly from Old Rattlebrain's bearded lips, "before you see the end of this wretched existence. That is what we are all coming to. Beyond that no man can look. God alone knows the secret of Eternity."

Chris stepped forward.
 "Pards," he spoke, "our comrade lies before us. We all know how he came there."

An ominous murmur came from the throng.
 "He was murdered," continued the young cowboy. "We know who fired the shot. It was intended for me, and, as there is a just God in Heaven, I will see that the murderer who fired it is called to an account!"

"We'll stan' by ye, lad," assured Round-up Rube. "Ther p'ison skunk can't escape!"

"He has friends," declared Chris, "desperate men who will stand by him till the end. And Lightfinger Flip is not the man to surrender without a struggle."

Over the body of poor Jimson the cowboys clasped hands and swore to know no peace till justice was done. Many of the witnesses shrugged their shoulders and shuddered, and one man muttered:

"I w'dn't be in Flip's boots fer hafe of ther Territory!"

Old Rattlebrain moved from the spot. As he was about to pass out at the door, another person entered.

The new-comer was a girl not more than eighteen years of age. She was dressed in a loose blouse waist and a short skirt that reached just below her knees. A wide-brimmed hat, from beneath which fell a mass of tangled sunny curls, was tipped far back on her head. Around her waist was a crimson sash, which supported a single revolver.

Despite the fact that her face had been browned by exposure to all kinds of weather, so a Fifth avenue belle would have declared her complexion was "ruined," she was pretty. Her eyes, deep-blue as the summer skies, lighted and animated her whole face.

As his eyes rested on this girl, Old Rattlebrain reeled back a step, thrusting out his hand and uttering a hoarse cry:

"My God!"

The girl was astonished.

In another moment the strange old man gave one cat-like leap and reached her side. Clutching one of her wrists in a savage grasp, he peered wildly into her face.

Although startled, the girl seemed to quickly regain her composure, her free hand falling on the butt of her revolver.

"Well, I reckon you will know me next time," she laughed, returning the man's look. "But, if you are in doubt, you can look on my left wrist. You will find the imprint of your fingers there."

"That face—those eyes! God!"

For another moment he stared like one fascinated, then he released the girl's wrist, clasped his hands to his head, gave utterance to a mingled cry and moan, and staggered through the open doorway into the darkness beyond.

CHAPTER VI.

NUGGET NELL.

WITH a peculiar look on her pretty face, the girl stared after the vanished form of the mysterious man.

"Well, that is what gets me!" she nodded. "He must be cracked in the upper story."

Pete hurried toward her.

"Fo' de lan' sakes, Missy Nell, w'at yo' in yere fo'?" he cried. "Dis hain't no place fo' yo'!"

"Oh, there you are, are you!" was her retort. "You seem to be as lively as ever, Peter."

"I's all right; but, whuffo' yo' in hyeah?"

"I usually go where I please," was her retort. "I heard there had been trouble in here, and I was afraid you had been hurt, so I came in to see."

"Is dat it? Well, yo' nebbber wanten worry 'bout dis chile gittin' hurt w'ile his legs am all right. W'en dar's any danger, I allus mek a break fo' kiver, an' usumly all dat's seen ob me is a black streak in de air."

"But who was hurt? Can I be of any assistance?"

"Yo' 's too late, missy. It wur a cowboy dat got in de way of a bullet."

"Poor fellow! Is he dead?"

"Dead fo' suah. It wur one ob dem fellers from de Robinson Ranch, whar we stopped las' week."

The girl caught Pete by the arm.

"Who was it? It was not—not—"

As she hesitated, the darky broke into a laugh that caused her face to become crimson.

"Oh, no, missy; twarn't him. But it kem drefful night bein' him, fo' de bullet wur fired at him. It wur a bressed narrer squak fo' de young feller wif de long hair."

"Hush, Pete!" she cautioned. "You talk too much sometimes. Is Mr. Chris in the saloon?"

"Suar. He am ober dar whar de dead feller am. But dis hain't no place fo' you, Missy Nell. Low me to 'squart yo' out ob heah."

The girl shook her head, decidedly.

"I am going to see Mr. Chris," she asserted. "Just you lead the way to him, Peter."

The darky lifted his hands with an expression of astonishment.

"Fo' Hebben's sake!" he gasped. "I'd jes' like t' know w'at yo' won't do nex'! If 'twuzn't fer dat pretty face ob you'n, yo' 'd be more lek a boy den like a gal! Yo' jes don' mine nuffin' at all, and yo' goes roun' whar yo' please. W'en I tole yo' pore ole mammy dat I'd be a fedder, to yo' an' look arter yo', I nebbber dreamed w'at a powerful job I wur tekin' onto my ole shoulders."

'Andy 'Arry espied the girl and promptly came forward. Pausing a few feet away, he lifted his wrecked silk hat and made his prettiest bow. Then he screwed his eyeglass into his eye and surveyed the girl from head to foot, his astonishment and admiration being evident.

"Well, b' Jove! Ye know Hi ham surprised!"

The girl returned his inspection, and promptly retorted:

"So ham Hi!"

"Hi never hexpected to see hanything hof this sort hin this part of this blawsted bloody country!"

"Nor did I. The shock is mutual. Pete, get me some water, quick, before I faint!"

At this the darky grinned.

"Chawming creature!" gushed the Londoner. "B' Jove! she looks almost as well as a Henglish girl!"

"That kind of flattery doesn't go down," laughed Nell. "You are not at all clever, sir, or you would paste it on a little thicker. A girl does not relish being told that she looks almost as well as some one else. You must tell her she takes the plum. Go to the American dude and learn a lesson, Johnny!"

'Arry gasped in astonishment.

"Well, Hi never!" he spluttered. "This his really hastingound! Hi never 'eard a girl talk so! Hi ham hastingound!"

"You look it," declared the girl, soberly. "You look dazed, as if some one had hit you with a club. What is the matter with your hat? Have you been trying to stand on your head?"

"My 'at was haxidentally crushed, young lady; but Hi assure you Hi shall purchase hanother hat my heartiest hopportunity."

"It is a pity you couldn't purchase something to go under it."

"Hi ham not sure Hi hunderstand you."

"Well, never mind.—Pete, will you lead the way to Mr. Chris?"

"My dear young lady," and 'Arry placed himself directly in Nell's path. "This is scarcely a place for you. Ti is is han hawful 'ole."

"Will you stand aside, sir?"

"Old hon, miss, Hi want to talk with you. Hi would be a friend to you, ye know."

"Many thanks; but I fancy I can look out for number one. Will you get out of the way, sir?"

But 'Arry was not to be baffled so easily.

"Hit is not possible you hunderstand what kind hof a place this his. There are a regular gang of murderers hand thieves hin 'ere," he asserted. "Hif you will ballow me, Hi will bescort you to a place hof safety."

"Didn't you hear me tell you I could look out for number one?"

"Yes, but—"

"There are no buts about it," flashed the girl, her blue eyes getting a dangerous gleam. "I have no use for duses, so the quicker you take a tumble to yourself, the better for you. I have asked you to let me pass. I will repeat the request, and if you do not immediately comply, I shall make you stand aside."

"Surely you hare not—"

"Will you let me pass, sir?"

"Hi really think hit his my duty to— Bloody murder!"

"Stand aside!"

A revolver gleamed in one small brown hand as the girl uttered the command, and it was pointed straight at 'Andy 'Arry's nose. The startled and frightened Englishman reeled back a step, throwing up his hands.

"Eavens hand hearth!" he gasped. "Hi never saw the like hof that! Be careful, girl! that bloody weapon may be loaded!"

"May be! You bet your life it is loaded! Just clear the road, Johnny."

'Arry did not hesitate longer, but he muttered, as he stepped aside:

"Well, Hi will be blowed! Hi wonder hif

hall Hamerican girls hare like this one? Hif so, Hi 'ope Hi shall never be unfortunate benough to marry one."

"You never will," was Nell's half-laughing declaration, as she lowered the revolver. "'Cause why? 'Cause you will never find one simple enough to have you. See?"

"By golly, boss!" laughed Pete, slapping his thigh. "Yo' 's struck de wrong chile w'en yo' tries to hab any fun wid dis gal. She kin outchin de bes' ob 'em, an' yo' 's mighty fur from de bes'. Yo' bettah go lay do'n somewhar an' cool off fo' a while."

Then the amused negro led the way toward the throng gathered around the table on which lay Jimson's dead body.

Cowboy Chris saw them approaching, and hastened to meet them, a look of surprise on his handsome face.

"Why, Miss Nell!" he cried. "Is this you in here?"

"It is I, be not afraid," was the reply, as she held out her hand. "How do you do, Mr. Chris?"

He took her hand, a look of gratification overspreading his fine face.

"I might have known that you were in Hot Hole, for Pete is here. But during the excitement of the unfortunate events which have just transpired, I have scarcely noticed anything."

"I hear one of the men from your ranch has been shot."

"Yes, poor fellow! It was Jimson. His life was ended by the bullet intended for me, but the wretch who murdered him shall stretch hemp for it! The boys have pledged themselves to see justice done."

"Who shot him?"

"A gambler called Lightfinger Flip, whom I detected cheating at cards. Jimson was behind me and a little at one side. The card-sharp fired from his pocket."

"And meant to shoot you?"

"Yes."

"That was a close call for you, Mr. Chris."

"Close indeed! But, Miss Nell, this is scarcely a fit place for you. Shall I—"

"Now, do not ask to escort me out!" she protested. "If you do, I shall have to refuse, or that Henglish dandy will be offended ye know. He really insisted, and I had to assure him I was in the habit of going it alone."

"An' she 'shured him ob dat p'int at de p'int ob de resolver," grinned Pete. "By golly! I reckum dat feller won't fool roun' her any more!"

After a few moments of conference with Chris, Nell and Pete turned to leave the saloon. A stranger in the camp, who had been gazing admiringly at her, appealed to a citizen and asked:

"Who is that handsome girl?"

"Thet," was the reply, "is Nugget Nell. She's straight as er string, partner, an' you kin bet yer skin thar hain't no flies on her!"

CHAPTER VII.

OLD FOES MEET.

JUST before the girl and her darky escort reached the door, Whisky Jim suddenly reappeared. His gait was decidedly unsteady, and when he saw Nell, he staggered toward her, bringing his hand down heavily on her shoulder.

"Hello!" he greeted, thickly. "Blame my eyes if it hain't Nellie! Howdy, ole gal!"

Pete uttered a cry of rage, and flew at the big tough like a mad-dog.

"Yo' misserable trash!" he shouted. "Tek yo' dirty han's offen dat gal!"

Still clutching Nell by the shoulder, the ruffian swung back the clinched fist of his free hand and delivered a lurching blow that caught the faithful negro fairly between the eyes, knocking him down.

"Take thet, you onery black imp!" he snarled. "I reckon thet will teach you better then ter interfere with er gentleman. But, if it don't, I'll—"

He never explained what he would do.

Fred Walker was entering the saloon close behind the tough, and he was a witness of the same. With a cry of indignation, he leaped forward, his fist shooting straight out from the shoulder and landing squarely behind Whisky Jim's left ear. The heavy ruffian was lifted off his feet and hurled headlong to the floor. Some of the spectators declared it was the handsomest knock-down blow they ever witnessed.

Fred had not been a moment too soon, for Cowboy Chris was rushing to the spot, intent on assisting the girl. He halted with a muttered exclamation, as he saw the young tenderfoot's prompt action.

Fred instantly turned toward Nugget Nell, saying, as he lifted his hat:

"I trust you are not harmed, young lady?"

"Not a bit!" was her prompt reply, as her hand fell from the revolver she had grasped. "But you just saved that big tough's life."

"How is that?" asked Fred, in astonishment.

"If you hadn't knocked him down just as you did, I certainly should have shot him. I thank you for saving me such an unpleasant duty."

The tenderfoot's astonishment increased. Nothing this, Nell broke into a merry laugh.

"Perhaps you wonder what kind of a girl I am?" she remarked. "Well, I am one who has to look out for herself."

"Wid my assistumce, Missy Nell," put in Pete, who had risen to his feet and was softly rubbing his forehead where Whisky Jim's fist had struck. "By jinkums! dat feller's batterin'-ram wur kine ob hard, I's tellin' ye!"

"Look out there!"

The cry came from the crowd.

Whisky Jim had arisen to his feet, and drawn a long, wicked-looking knife, which he intended to plunge into Fred Walker's back. He would have succeeded in his murderous design, for all of the warning shout from the spectators, but for Cowboy Chris's prompt action.

With a lithe leap the young cattleman reached the tough just in time to catch the wrist of his descending hand and stay the stroke even as the point of the knife cut the back of the tenderfoot's coat.

"You spawn of Satan!" grated Chris, seizing the tough by the throat, and at the same time giving his wrist a wrench that caused him to drop the knife. "You deserve the dose you were going to give!"

Whisky Jim was a powerful man, but just then he was no match for the furious cowboy. Chris choked the ruffian till his face grew black and his tongue began to protrude, then he hurled the wretch aside as if he were a dog, and Jim fell to the floor with a heavy thump.

With an exclamation of disgust, the cowboy turned toward the youth whose life he had saved.

"Fred Anthrop, is it you?" he cried.

"Yes, Chris, it is I."

"And you are not dead?"

"Do I look like it?"

"Well, I can not understand it!"

"I assure you, I have never been dead," and the tenderfoot smiled sadly.

"But I left you with a bullet in your brain!"

"Hardly that."

"But I saw the place where the bullet struck, and your forehead was covered with blood."

Fred removed his hat, brushed back his hair, and revealed a red scar at the very crest of his forehead.

"There is where your bullet struck."

"And it did not kill you?"

"A bullet from a twenty-two short is not such a terribly dangerous thing. It ran over the top of my skull and rendered me unconscious."

"I thank God your blood is not on my hands!"

"It was a fair and square duel, Chris."

"Fair and square, but, all the same, from that day to this I have felt like a murderer. It is a terrible thing to think you have slain an old schoolmate and boon companion!"

"To this day the people of Woodsville believe it was an accident."

Chris looked amazed.

"How is that?"

"I told them it was done accidentally."

"And you held no bitterness after what had passed?"

"None. I saw we had made fools of ourselves."

The young cowboy's astonishment was too great for utterance.

Meantime, Nugget Nell and Pete had quietly left the saloon. Observing they were gone, Chris said:

"Come over here to one of these tables, Fred. I want to talk it over with you, and have many questions to ask."

Together they went over to one of the tables and sat down.

"As you said," began Chris, "we made fools of ourselves by fighting a duel over a girl. But, what has become of Jennie? Are you her?"

"I am nothing to her," interrupted Fred. "She is the only person who seemed to suspect the truth concerning our meeting, and from that time she would have nothing to say to me save in a friendly manner."

"Then she is still single?"

"No; she is married."

"Married to whom?"

"A dashing stranger who came along. She lives in Brooklyn now."

Chris fell back in his chair, a sad, yet half-scornful smile on his face.

"Thus ends the first romance of our lives," he said.

"But I am well satisfied that the ending is no worse," declared Fred. "You nearly succeeded in taking my life once, but to-night you more than evened the score by saving it."

They both glanced toward the spot where Chris had hurled Whisky Jim's limp body, and they saw the ruffian slowly arising to his feet, caressing his thick throat with one hand. He glared around the room till his eyes rested on the two young men at the table; his lips curled back from his yellow teeth and a wolfish look distorted his repulsive face.

"Cuss ye!" he cried, thickly. "I'll hev ther heart's blood of ye both!"

Then he turned and left the saloon.

"You will have to look out for that dastardly whelp," warned Chris. "He will do his best to murder you. It would be an excellent thing if Judge Lynch would take his case in hand."

"I am armed," asserted Fred, quietly.

"But there are some questions I wish to ask. The first is of my father. What about him?"

"I can tell you nothing."

"How is that?"

"He left Woodsville shortly after your disappearance."

"And his property—"

"He disposed of all his property before leaving the place."

"But, where did he go?"

"No one in Woodsville appears to know. He seemed to feel that he was disgraced there, although no one else looked at it in that light."

The young cowboy's face crimsoned with shame.

"I am to blame for it all!" he cried. "Still, there is less on my shoulders than I thought. But, Fred, how comes it that you are away out here in this wild country?"

Fred Anthrop did not immediately reply. Indeed, he hesitated so long that Chris said:

"Never mind; if there is any reason why you do not wish to tell, do not answer. I beg your pardon for asking."

Fred seemed relieved but confused.

Chris held out his hand.

"We have been enemies and learned our lesson. Let's shake and forget the past."

But, the young Easterner drew back.

"I can't do it," he declared.

Chris looked astonished and hurt.

"Do you mean that you still hold hard feelings against me, Fred?" he asked, gravely.

"No; it is not that."

"Then I cannot understand why you should refuse to take my hand."

Fred became still more confused.

"I—I am afraid I cannot explain," he faltered.

His eyes fell before the cowboy's steady gaze, but he suddenly lifted them, bursting forth, desperately:

"Chris, things have happened that have placed me in a false position. I will acknowledge I have lived a trifle fast since Jennie Doris gave me the shake, and my companions have sometimes been of a decidedly shady sort, but never have I done a dishonest act."

"I believe you, Fred."

"For all that, there is a stain on my name. I cannot take your hand till that stain is removed—if it ever is."

"Nonsense, Fred! Whatever the charge against you is, I will believe you are innocent, if you say so. Give me the pleasure of grasping your hand."

"Hold on, Chris. You must first know of what I am charged."

"I do not wish to hear it, if you do not want to tell."

"But I do want to tell. I will give you the points in a few words."

"As I said, I have led a fast life. I had the misfortune of having a father who supplied me with more money than I needed, and after Jennie gave me the go-by, I used to visit the city often. There I fell in with a gang of sharps and got to playing cards. They skinned me right along, but I was fool enough to keep at the game. Finally a large check was drawn on father's account at the bank, and on examining the paper, he pronounced the check a forgery. The next thing I knew, I was charged with being the forger. I never saw the paper in my life, but it was easily proven that I had gambled

heavily with the party who presented it at the bank, and he claimed I gave him the check in payment for such a debt. One of his pals swore he saw me give the fellow the check, and things looked black for me. Father hastened to straighten out the affair, but the stain remained on my name, and my own parents were inclined to believe me guilty."

"But I believe you are innocent. Shake, Fred!"

"Hold on, Chris; there is worse to follow. Do you remember old Ichabod Spiles?"

"The old miser who lived in the hut on Harmony Hill? Yes, I remember him."

"He was robbed and murdered. One of the parties engaged in the black work has been captured, and he was the individual who presented the forged check. He has refused to betray his pals but suspicion pointed to me as being one of them. I found myself constantly watched, and it was whispered that the fellow captured had intimated that he would confess if there was a chance of his sentence being made lighter. For three nights in succession I dreamed he had implicated me. A terror I cannot describe seized upon me, and although I suspect it was a foolish act, I fled. I am here. That is the whole of my story."

Once more the young cowboy held out his hand.

"I believe you are innocent. Take it, Fred."

A strange look passed over the young Easterner's face.

"Chris," he cried, "you are white to the core!"

Then their hands met in a warm grasp.

"The past shall be forgotten," came earnestly from the young cowboy's lips. "We will hope the future holds something better in store for us both."

CHAPTER VIII.

A DESPERATE GANG.

WHEN a man is dead, it is customary in the Wild West to get him "planted" as soon as possible. Jimson was dead, and his comrades made immediate preparations for his burial.

At the request of the proprietor of the Whoo Emma, the body was removed to a small back room, and there the carpenter set about making the plain wooden box in which the body was to be interred.

Two more men were sent out with pick and spade to dig the grave.

The Whoo Emma was again filled with the motley assembly seen there earlier in the evening, and the faro-bank opened for the night's run. While the dealer was calling to the players to make their gam, the sound of the carpenter's hammer and saw could be heard making the coffin of one whose game of life was ended.

Some of the cowboys remained beside the dead body of their comrade, while others wandered about, their faces hard-set and a dangerous gleam in their eyes.

They were looking for Lightfinger Flip!

But, the crafty card-sharp was "layin' mighty low" for the time.

It was near midnight when the coffin was completed and the grave prepared.

Tender hands placed the dead within the rude box, and the cowboys stood around to take a last look at his face and make remarks about the man's natural though rugged nobility of soul. Their tears were dried, but there was a pain in many a heart and many a face was marked with sadness.

"W'er we hev putt him erway," said Round-up Rube, softly, "then we'll make a hot hunt fer ther p'ison skunk w'at killed him. Pore boy—pore Jim! He wuz ther clean white article, an' no mistake!"

Chris was silent, but his face told his thoughts almost as plainly as words could have done.

Finally, the cover was placed on the coffin, and Jimson was shut in from human eyes forever.

A little later a strange procession moved along the single street of Hot Hole. In advance were two cowboys, bearing lighted torches. Close behind them came four more carrying the coffin that contained the remains of their comrade. The others, also bearing torches, followed the coffin.

There was no sound of solemn music, no tap of muffled drum, only the steady tramp, tramp of the cowboys as they moved toward the burying ground of the new camp—a place where an alarming number of new graves had already been made.

The grave was reached, and with lariats the coffin was lowered into the shallow hole. Then

one of the men, who had once been an itinerant preacher, offered a brief prayer. After this, the cowboys filled the grave.

"Now," fell sternly from Chris Comstock's lips, "we will look for the man who murdered our pard."

"Right, boy!" assented Round-up Rube. "An' w'en we find him, we'll—" The bow-legged cowboy ended with a very expressive pantomime, as if he were pulling on a rope.

At this a savage and ominous muttering came from the rough men of ranch and range—a muttering that swelled louder and louder until it became a hoarse cry for vengeance! Woe to Lightfinger Flip if he fell into the hands of the men whom he had made his most deadly enemies!

The torches were cast aside and the cowboys turned back toward the town.

As they reached the crooked main street of Hot Hole they were met by 'Andy 'Arry. The Englishman was running as if pursued by enemies who were thirsting for his blood, and he seemed greatly frightened. He dashed straight into the arms of a tall cowboy.

"Hello!" exclaimed the cattleman. "W'at in sin's ther matter with you?"

"Let go hof me, you bloody scoundrell!" squawked the "Lunnon sport." "Hi will 'ave you harrested hif you hoffer me hany binjury, b'Jove!"

The cowboy held him off at arm's length, where 'Arry squirmed in a vain endeavor to get free.

"It is the Englishman," explained Chris. "Let him go, Davis."

"Old hon!" exclaimed 'Arry, excitedly, recognizing Chris's voice. "You hare the very hindividual Hi ham looking for, ye know."

"What do you want of me?"

"You hare the fellow that saved me from being skinned by that bloody scoundrell who shot your friend. Hi know where that fellow is."

With a single stride, the young cowboy reached the Englishman and laid an iron clutch on his arm.

"You know where Lightfinger Flip is?"

"Hi do."

"Where is he?"

"E is hin the saloon."

"Where he shot Jimson?"

"Yes."

"When did he return there?"

"As soon has you hand your friends left. 'E his there with a lot hof his pals."

"This is just what we want to know. Come on, boys."

"Old hon!" cried 'Arry once more. "Hi 'ave something more to tell you."

"Then be quick about it. We have no time to waste."

"Hi was hin the saloon when 'e returned, but Hi managed to 'ide. Hif they 'ad seen me, they would 'ave killed me, for Hi 'eard the leader say so. 'E said 'e would 'ave his money back some'ow. 'E knows you fellows hare after him, hand 'e swears 'e will give you a 'ot time. With his pals, 'e is going to hopen hon you has soon has you henter the saloon."

"Ther durned whelps!" grated Round-up Rube. "They mean ter clean out ther hull blamed crowd of us!"

"They are a desperate gang," declared Chris. "It is plain we are going to have no small job in bringing this Lightfinger Flip to his just deserts."

"But we'll bring him thar, cuss him!" gritted Rube. "I jes' wish I had my han's on ther p'ison skunk's woozle at this minute! Derved ef I don't b'lieve I'd finish ther job without further foolin'!"

"Hi managed to slip hout hof the saloon," 'Arry went on, "hand Hi 'urried to bring you fellows the news. There hare some men watching for you houtside the saloon, for one hof 'em got hatter me, hand Hi 'ad to run for my life."

"They have posted guards to warn Flip and his pards when we are coming. It is plain they mean war, pards—war to the tooth."

"An' we'll guv 'em all ther war they want," asserted the bow-legged cattleman. "There are ernough o' us ter jes' take ther hull onery town."

"It might prove an easier thing to take the town than to take Lightfinger Flip," observed Chris. "But, for all of that, we will take him if it costs the last one of us his blood! Eh, lads?"

A shout of assent came from his comrades.

"Every man make sure his guns are in working order," fell calmly from the lips of the youthful cowboy leader. "Have them ready for instant work, and follow me!"

Then he led the way straight toward the Whoa Emma, and the others followed close at his heels, 'Andy 'Arry bringing up the rear.

Before they reached the saloon, another person came rushing up to them, panting and excited.

It was Pete, the darky.

"Whar am Massa Chris?" he gasped.

"Right here, Pete," replied the young man.

"What is it—what has happened?"

"Oh, massa, massa!" wailed the negro, catching hold of the young cowboy's hand. "Missy Nell an' dat young tenderfeets—dem misserble critters in de saloon hab cotched 'em!"

CHAPTER IX.

LIGHTFINGER FLIP HOLDS THE DROP.

"WHAT'S that?" cried Chris, grasping Pete by his shoulders and holding him at arm's length. "What did you say?"

"Dey've cotched 'em! dey've cotched 'em!" moaned the darky. "I jes' couldn' keep dem from takin' Missy Nell! Dey knock me on de head, an' if my ole cokernut hadn't been powerful hard, I'd been a dead nigger now. Oh, de good Lawd sabe us!"

"Did you say they were in the saloon?"

"Yes, dat's whar dey am, Massa Chris."

The young cowboy wheeled toward his companions.

"Boys," he cried, "we have not a moment to lose. There is no telling what injurv may be done to the young lady, and as for Fred Anthropol, he is within the reach of Whisky Jim. If we do not save him, his chances are mighty slim. Come on!"

Once more they made a rush for the saloon, and as they hurried along, Chris gave them further instructions:

"They will be on the watch and expecting us. We must get them on the hip some way. It is probable they will expect us to rush into the saloon, but we will play a little trick on them. I will enter the saloon, but the rest of you must remain outside at the open windows and get the drop on the gang. Then, if it is necessary, you can open on them at exactly the right time."

The saloon was quickly reached, and with drawn and cocked revolvers, the cowboys took their places outside the windows, where they could command the entire interior.

They were not a moment too soon.

Fred Anthropol was sitting in a chair to which he had been securely bound, and before him stood Whisky Jim, a devilish grin on his evil face and a long knife in his hand.

"Comin', are they?" snarled the wretch, with the knife, as one of the guards informed the gang the cowboys were approaching. "Waal, let 'em come. When they git hyer, we'll guv 'em a ractin' that will make 'em sizzle. But, afore they come I'll jes' dispose of you, my fine feller. I'll cut yer onery white throat!"

As he seized the helpless tenderfoot by the shoulder, the gleaming knife being upraised, a clear voice cried:

"Hold on there, you imp of Satan's pit! Go slow, or I will open up a lead mine in your head!"

It was Nugget Nell's voice, and Nugget Nell's shining revolver 'almost touched Whisky Jim's left ear!

"I mean biz, you bet!" nodded the brave girl, a look of desperate determination on her handsome face. "I have you under cover, and if you do not put on the breaks, I will send a bullet searching after your brains. The chances are the bullet would fail to find anything of that kind, but it would make an ugly hole where they ought to be."

Whisky Jim uttered a snarl of rage.

"Take her away, somebody!" he howled. "She's er reg'ler cat! Take her away 'fore ther cowboys git hyer!"

"If a man offers to lay a hand on me, I will salt you, you big ruffian!" cried the undaunted girl.

Lightfinger Flip looked on as if amused, but made no move to aid his satellite.

"She seems to h ve the drop, Jim," he laughed. Nevada Mike succeeded in catching Nell's arm and thrusting the menacing revolver aside.

"Go erhead with yer hog-killin, pard," he ordered, holding the struggling girl so she could make no move to save the young Easterner.

"Well, now, I wouldn't!" spoke a quiet voice, and Cowboy Chris vaulted into the room through one of the open windows. "It will be decidedly unhealthy for him to do so."

A howl of fury broke from Whisky Jim's lips. "I'll hev ther satisfaction of cuttin' ther heart out of ye both!" he roared.

"Well, not this eve," was the cool retort. "You will observe I am beeled, and I shall deliberately blow the whole top of your head off if you do not drop that knife. Drop it!"

Whisky Jim cast a look of appeal toward his comrades.

"It will not be healthy for them to chip in unless they desire the fun of attending your funeral," asserted the defiant young cowboy. "I shall perforate you without so much as a pang of remorse, if I feel it is my duty to do so."

The crowd of toughs were amazed by the apparent audacity of the cattleman. In vain they looked around for his comrades, and they could not understand Chris's evident foolhardiness in venturing alone into their midst.

"Jump him, pards, jump him!" hissed Whisky Jim.

"The man who tries it gets a straight pass to the happy hunting-grounds," assured Chris. "Do not take me for a fool, gentlemen, if I do look like one. I know my gait, and I am not letting my head run away with my heels."

This had the effect of causing the desperadoes to hesitate somewhat, while they looked to their leader for instructions. Lightfinger Flip seemed puzzled.

"Throw down that knife!" commanded Chris, sternly. "I am not going to fool with you a moment. If you do not drop it instantly, I will send you to tend the fires of your master down below. Drop it!"

The blade fell from the whisky tough's hand and struck point first in the floor, where it stood quivering.

"That is right. It is plain you are not such a fool as I was half-inclined to believe."

"And you," broke in the icy voice of Lightfinger Flip—"you are a bigger fool than I thought possible. I have you lined."

The young cowboy did not even turn his head.

"Did you ever get left?" he calmly inquired. "There is such a thing as being too sharp for one's own health, a fact which you should fully realize."

"But I hold the drop just now, and I am not the man to get left with such an advantage. If you will cast a glance over your shoulder, you can look into the muzzle of my bulldog."

"And for that reason you think you have me on the hip. You never made a bigger error in all your life."

This seemed to confound the gambler somewhat, but he retorted:

"Talk is cheap. Show your cards."

"The man who shows his hand prematurely is pretty certain to get left. Excuse me if I hold off till the pot is fatted. But I will inform you now that I have a royal flush. You can believe it or not as you choose."

"You have royal gall!" was the card-sharp's half-admiring assertion. "But it is plain you are playing a game of bluff."

"You must not think so because you are in the habit of playing that game. This is a game of life and death, as you will find. The first victim has fallen through your treachery, but it will not be long before you go to keep him company in the little graveyard over by the pines. Your hours—your minutes are numbered."

At this the gambler turned a shade paler, but forced a scornful laugh.

"It is plain you like to hear yourself talk," he sneered. "You will go under the sod first, my boy, for I shall finish you off directly."

"Now don't be in a hurry with your finishing," advised the young cattleman. "You may make a mistake. I do not suppose you are aware that about a dozen guns are trained directly on your black heart and an equal number of bullets will find their way through that important organ of your body if you pull trigger on me?"

"Another try at bluff," fell from the gambler's lips.

"Do you think so? Well, what do you suppose my pards are doing all this time?"

Lightfinger Flip did not reply.

Chris laughed.

"If you will take the trouble to glance toward the windows," he smiled, "you will tumble to the situation."

"Holy thunder!" cried Nevada Mike. "Ther cow-punchers hev ther drop from ther outside." This created a decided sensation among the toughs.

"Well, now," remarked Chris, "with the aid of my pointer, you have managed to grasp the situation at last."

Lightfinger Flip swore roundly.

"Foul play!" he snarled.

At that moment the commanding figure of Old Rattlebrain appeared. As he heard the gambler's cry, the strange man dashed forward, shouting:

"Those were the very words! The voice is the same! Where is the devil who spoke?"

The desperadoes were startled by the furious aspect of the madman.

"Where is he?" howled Rattlebrain, glaring wildly around. "Let me get my fingers on his throat! I will have vengeance—vengeance!"

The fingers of his powerful hands worked as if he were crushing the life from something. Those in his immediate vicinity fell back before him, terror written on their faces.

"It has been years," he went on wildly; "but still I remember those words. 'Foul play!' That was what he cried! Where is he? I will kill him!"

"Get out of the way, old man, or you will get hurt," commanded Lightfinger Flip, his face being as pale as that of a corpse.

A hoarse scream that was terrible in its intensity broke from the madman's lips, as he bent forward in a crouching position and glared into the gambler's face.

"That is the voice!" shouted the demented man again. "The face does not seem to be the same; but that is the voice! Devil, I have found you at last!"

The card-sharp suddenly whirled from Cowboy Chris and covered the madman with his cocked weapon.

"Stand off!" he commanded. "Stand off! If you approach me, I will shoot you in your tracks!"

"Do you think you can kill me? You tried it once, you assassin, and failed! I have lived all these years for the purpose of settling the score, and now I shall settle it. Ha! ha! ha! I will end your life in a moment! I will tear your body limb from limb and cast it to the winds for the vultures to feed upon. Prepare to die!"

The gambler fell back a step, terror plainly written on his face. Although he was usually steady and cool, at that moment his hand was shaking badly, showing how unstrung his nerves had become.

"I hold the drop," he cried, huskily. "I shall shoot you as surely as you approach me! Keep your distance, if you want to live, old man!"

"Ha! ha! ha!" once more fell the wild laugh from Old Rattlebrain's lips. "Your face is white with terror, for you are looking on one whom you supposed dead. But the dead lives—lives to wreak vengeance on the one who sought to murder him! Your time has come!"

As he sprang forward with outstretched hands, Lightfinger Flip pulled the trigger!

CHAPTER X.

THE CARD SHARP'S DODGE.

As the gambler's weapon spoke, Old Rattlebrain halted in his mad rush and swayed as if about to fall, stretching out his arms blindly.

As if the report of Flip's weapon had been a preconcerted signal, there was a crash of shots that was fairly deafening, and with a rattling jingle of broken glass, the lights in the saloon were extinguished for a second time that night.

Then followed shouts, shots, and the sudden thuds of heavy blows. Men who were rushing in opposite directions collided and went to the floor in a yelling, struggling mass. Pandemonium reigned for the time.

In the midst of all the noise and excitement, there came a loud, piercing shriek—a woman's cry of terror! Like the keen blade of a knife, it cut to the heart of many a man.

For a moment there was a hush in the wild excitement, then the turmoil went on with redoubled fury for a short time.

When the excitement had ceased in a measure, some one found an overturned and chimneyless lamp and lighted it. In a few moments other lights appeared, then those who remained in the saloon began to look around.

Cowboy Chris was standing erect in the center of the room, his undischarged revolver grasped in his hand. His left sleeve had been slashed by a knife, and the blood that slowly trickled from the ends of his fingers told that he had been cut.

There were three prostrate forms on the floor, one that lay limp and silent, one that was groaning dismally, and one that was bound to an overturned chair.

The last was Fred Anthropol.

Lightfinger Flip and his pals had disappeared, and Nugget Nell was also missing. Nor was Old Rattlebrain to be seen.

As the cowboys came hurrying into the saloon, Chris bent over Fred Anthropol.

"Are you hurt, Fred?" he asked.

"Not a bit, Chris," was the ready reply. "Some one pushed me over, and I fancy that saved me from Whisky Jim's knife. I think I know who befriended me at such a critical moment."

"Who?"

"The girl who so heroically faced the whisky tough when he was about to cut my throat. Where is she?"

"She is gone," explained the young cowboy, as he produced a knife and cut the tenderfoot free from the overturned chair.

"Gone!" echoed Fred.

"Yes; she has vanished."

The young men looked into each other's eyes.

"Those devils—"

"Have carried her off."

"And the shriek—"

"Was her cry."

Fred smote his clinched hands together.

"She must be saved!" he almost shouted.

"That is right," from Chris's lips. "We will save her from those ruffians, or—"

"Or die in the attempt!" melodramatically finished the young Easterner.

"If they harm her we will lynch the whole gang!"

"But you are hurt, Chris."

"That's er fac'," nodded Round-up Rube, the veteran having reached his young comrade's side. "Ther crimson is runnin' off ther eends o' yer fingers in er stream. Some dirty cuss tried ter stick ye in ther dark."

"It is nothing but a scratch," declared Chris, calmly. "Don't mind me now. Lightfinger Flip and his pards must be followed."

"But you've gotter hev ther cut tied up," asserted the bow-legged cowboy. "Flip can't git very fur away, I'll low. An' ther rest o' ther boys are lookin' arter him. It won't take me more'n two shakes ter fix ther slash so ther blood won't keep er runnin' down yer arm."

With reluctance, Chris consented to have the cut bandaged, and Rube soon had it looked after.

With one or two exceptions, all the cowboys had entered the saloon and gathered around their youthful leader.

"Some of you should know which way that tricky gambler went," said Chris. "Did no one see him?"

"I saw er dozen figgers skoot past w'en ther lights went out," declared one; "but I'll be blowed ef I c'd tell ef ary one of 'em wuz Flip!"

"It will not do for that devil to give us the slip now," came sternly from the youthful cattleman's lips. "He and his pals have carried off Nugget Nell. They may decide this town is getting too hot for them, and strike for pastures new. We must prevent that, if possible. Out, pards—out and look for 'em!"

He led the way from the saloon.

But, when the street was reached, they scarcely knew which way to turn.

"We will turn the whole town bottom up but we will find them!" hotly declared Cowboy Chris.

"Right, lad, right!" agreed Round-up Rube. "An' w'en we do fine 'em, I reckon we won't fool with ther skunks any longer."

An ominous growl came from the entire party.

"The respectable citizens of this town should be on our side," asserted Chris. "I fancy they would be glad to get rid of the gambler and his gang."

They had not proceeded far before 'Andy 'Arry sneaked out of the deeper shadows and joined them.

"Blawst my 'ide!" he gurgled. "Hi never saw such a bloody hinfurnal place as this 'ere one! Aman never knows what confounded thing will 'appen next! Hi wish Hi was back hin hold Hengland!"

"Do ye 'spect ter git back erlive, Johnny?" asked one of the cowboys.

"Hit's doubtful hif Hi do," confessed the Londoner. "Hi ham hin constant fear hof has-sassination. Hi would like to hask hif there isn't hany law in this confounded country?"

"Lots of it, Pard Johnny. W'en we gits our ban's onter ther feller we're arter, you will see a sample of our law if you are around. Our law is mighty spry w'en it gits ter work, but it sometimes takes it a blamed long while ter git started."

"Hi would go to bed hand try to get some sleep," said 'Arry; "but Hi ham hafraid Hi would be hassassinated hand never know hany-thing habout hit."

"Waal, you're in danger of dyin' fer want of sleep."

"Where's ther nigger?" asked one of the party.

"Hain't seen him since ther lights were doused in ther saloon," replied another.

"And whar's Ben Holt?"

"He hain't hyer."

One of their number was missing.

"Hes ary one seen him since ther blow-out in ther saloon?"

No answer.

"I'll bet some of them critters hev wiped him out!"

"Ef they hev—"

"The score against them will be doubled," fell icily from Chris Comstock's lips.

At this moment a figure came hurrying toward them out of the darkness, and a well-known voice hailed them.

"It's Ben!" exclaimed Round-up Rube, with satisfaction. "Ther ole man's still on his pins."

The cowboy hastened to join his comrades.

"Yer want ter foller me, pards!" he panted.

"Ther nigger an' I hev located ther skunks!"

"Flip an' his pards?"

"Yep."

"Whar are they?"

"In a cabin over hyar. I left ther nigger ter watch."

"And the girl?" cried Fred Anthropol, eagerly.

"Is she with them?"

"I reckon."

"Lead the way," cried Chris.

With his comrades at his heels, Ben Holt hurried swiftly through the darkness till he reached a cabin that stood on the very outskirts of the town. They approached the rude building cautiously.

"I wonder whar ther nigger is?" muttered Ben. "I left him hyer or hyerabouts, an' he said he w'dn't stir tell I kem back."

But, Pete was not to be found.

"Thet's mighty sing'ler!" growled the cowboy. "I don't reckon he wuz skeered away, fer it takes a heap ter skeer thet nig w'en ther gal's concerned. Suthin's happened."

"Well, let's make a raid on the cabin," eagerly suggested Fred Anthropol.

"We'll spread out an' surround it fu'st, so ther critters can't guv us ther slip."

"That is right," assented Chris. "Surround the cabin, boys, and whistle when you get in place."

In a few minutes a series of short sharp whistles told that the men were ready for business. Then Chris Comstock advanced boldly toward the cabin.

The young cowboy was still some distance from the door when a voice from within called out for him to halt.

"Jest chain up thar," commanded the man within the cabin. "Putt down brakes ef ye don't want ter chaw lead!"

Chris halted promptly.

"Thet's right," commanded the unseen man. "I hev ther drop, an' I hev it bad."

"I should advise you to go a trifle slow about using your gun," said the young cowboy. "If you get too fresh in the way you handle it, you may find yourself hung up to dry from the limb of a tree."

"Now, thet's derved hansum tork!" snorted the person inside. "Ef er man hain't got er right ter defen' his own propperty, I'll low I don't know er blamed thing 'bout ther law of this great an' glorious kentry!"

"I am not here to palaver," was the young cowboy's declaration.

"Waal, I'd jes' like ter know w'at ye are hyer fer? I kine of tuck it thet ye wuz er fire-bug goin' ter tetch off this yere Queen Ann cottage of mine. I jest erbout reckoned I'd run er hole in yer system ef thet wuz yer game."

"This house is surrounded by my friends," asserted Chris. "We have come to take Lightfinger Flip."

"Waal, ye hev come ter ther wrong place. He hain't hyer."

"That will not go down. He was seen to come here."

"Some galoot's eyes played 'em er mighty scaly trick."

"Open your door."

"Not by a blamed sight! Jest you an' yer pards keep yer distance ef ye don't want ter chew lead!"

"If you do not open your door, we shall batter it down."

"It will be derved unhealthy fer ye ter try thet. I'll guv some of ye their everlastin' sickness, you bet!"

"And hang to the limb of the nearest tree for your folly. If you have any brains at all, you will make no resistance. We care not if you have twenty men at your back, we are going to have Lightfinger Flip."

"Waal, go take him, an' be dad-burned ter ye! But I do want ve ter git out of this. I hain't but jes' got ready ter roll in fer ther night, an' I'll low I'd like a bit of sleep afore sun-up. Come, crawl out of this!"

"This is the last call," came icily from Chris Comstock's lips. "Open that door immediately, or it will be battered down!"

"Go ter blazes an' roast yer shins!"

Chris gave a shout that was echoed by his friends, and a general rush was made for the cabin. The men expected to be greeted by a volley of shots, but not a weapon was discharged.

Like a cyclone they hurled themselves against the door, which went down with a crash before their mad charge. Into the hut they burst to be greeted by an astonishing sight.

There was only one man within the cabin, and he was sitting on an empty keg, calmly smoking a black pipe, no weapons being displayed about him.

"That's right!" he growled, as the cowboys broke into the room. "Come right in an never stop ter try ther door. You've ripped it clean offen ther hinges, an' ef you'd jes' stopped an' tried it, you'd diskivered it wuzn't locked a tall. You cow-punchers are ther oneryest derned keel-less set of cusses I 'most never saw."

In another moment Round-up Rube had the man by the throat.

"Whar's Lightfinger Flip, you p'ison skunk?" snarled the bow-legged cowboy. "Talk lively an' mighty, straight ef ye don't want er through ticket fer ther infernal regions! It'd jest be er sarvice ter ther kentry ef I sh'd shet yer wind off fer good an' all, I reckon! Speak up, burn yer dirty hide!"

But, the grip of the excited cowboy's hands prevented the man from replying.

CHAPTER XI.

FRED FALLS INTO FOUL HANDS.

"SLOW and easy, pard," cautioned Chris, his hand falling on Rube's arm. "You are choking the man so he can not speak. Let up a bit, old man."

At this the bow-legged cowboy relaxed his grasp somewhat, at the same time growling, doggedly:

"It's w'at ther imp o' sin 's in need of, Chris. Only ef it wuz er rope as ringed his neck 'stead o' my grippers it'd be better. Think how ther p'ison skunk kep' us chinain! Holy heavens ter Betsy! but it jest duz make me b'illin'!"

Once more his strong fingers closed on the man's windpipe. The fellow squirmed and grasped at Rube's wrists with the intention of tearing the iron fingers away, but this only made the bow-legged cowboy more furious.

"Keep still, critter!" he gritted. "Ef ye go ter squirm'n' too much, I'll jest hev ter put on full steam! It hain't no boy you're foolin' with now, an' ye want ter keep thet in mine. Ef I c'd only hev my way, I'd mighty soon make short work o' you, an' all o' yer kine! Will ye wiggle? Waal, wiggle, double dern ye!"

It was necessary to drag the cowboy from his victim by main force. The man fell back on the keg, caressing his throat with his hands, and glaring savagely at Rube, as he vainly tried to articulate.

At this moment 'Andy' 'Arry thrust his head in at the door, and asked:

"Is there hany danger hof my getting 'urt hif Hi come hin now?"

But no one heeded the Englishman's question, and he edged cautiously into the room, apparently ready to run at the first intimation of danger.

"Look here!" cried Chris Comstock, sternly, grasping the shoulders of the single occupant of the hut and thrusting him backward till he could look straight down into his eyes. "We are here for business, straight, and the quicker you understand that the better it will be for you. We are not men to be fooled with."

"Waal, w'at in blazes are ye tryin' ter git through ye?" gurgled the occupant of the hut. "I hain't got no score with you, an' I'll be smoked if I think you hev with me!"

"That is where you make your mistake."

"Waal, w'at d'yer want?"

"We want to know what has become of Lightfinger Flip and his pards."

"Waal, w'y don't ye fine out? I hain't a-hinderin' of ye."

"We are going to find out, and you are going to tell us."

"That's whar you're off."

Chris's eyes flashed dangerously.

"Now, don't fool with us!" he warned. "We are not the kind of fellows who will stand it."

"That's right," nodded Rube. "Guv ther critter his medicine straight, Pard Chris."

"If you do not talk, we will find a way to make you talk."

The fellow's only reply was a defiant glare.

"I want you to understand one thing," con-

tinued the young cowboy. "Lightfinger Flip was seen to enter this cabin. It is useless for you to deny that. He was here less than thirty minutes ago. Where is he now?"

No reply.

Chris glanced upward. About two feet above his head was a heavy cross-piece.

"That will serve as well as the limb of a tree," he remarked, significantly.

An oath fell from the lips of the threatened man.

"Dern ye! ye don't durst!" he cried; but his face paled a little.

"Don't we? Well, you remain obstinate and see."

"It'd be bloody murder!"

"In this case it would be retributive justice. I know you, Peg Wallace, or Pistol Peg, as you are sometimes called. You have a decidedly dark record, and there is more t an one officer of the law who would be glad to get his hands on you."

The fellow looked dumfounded, but managed to falter:

"I hain't Peg Wallace; I'm Rast Russell."

"You mean you are trying to pass as Rast Russell now, but you are the genuine Pistol Peg."

"Waal, w'hat ef I am? Burn my skin ef I'll knuckle ter you!"

"Then you'll swing. Somebody give me a rope!"

In a moment a horse-hair lariat was thrust into the young cowboy's hands.

"Tie his hands behind him, pards; but leave his feet free so he can kick."

Strong hands seized the unlucky Pistol Peg, and the order was soon carried out to the letter. Still he remained obstinate, glaring savagely at his enemies.

Chris Comstock slipped the noose over the man's head and threw the loose end over the cross-piece. It was eagerly seized by willing hands.

"Now, will you talk?" asked Chris.

Pistol Peg did not deign to reply.

"Slow and easy, lads," cried the young cattleman. "Lift him gently on his toes."

"Up he goes!" gritted Round-up Rube; and with a strong swing, the unlucky devil was lifted clean off his feet.

Chris instantly gave the word to lower away, and the command was reluctantly obeyed.

"That is a simple taste of what will fall to you if you are foolish enough to go crooked," asserted the relentless leader of the cattlemen. "I have no desire to leave you swinging from that timber, but I shall surely do so if you do not come to your senses mighty lively."

The man gasped and gurgled, but made no reply.

"Where has Lightfinger Flip gone?"

"I don't know—cuss ye!"

"Lift him again, pards!"

Once more Pistol Peg was swung clear of the floor. This time he was held up a short time longer than before, and when he was lowered, it was several seconds before he could catch his breath.

"Are you ready to talk?"

The tough tried to speak, but could not utter a word.

"Give him a swallow of whisky, some one."

The order was obeyed.

"Are you ready to talk?"

"Hold on! Can't speak!"

"We have no time to lose. If you fool with us and we swing you up again, we may let you remain there. Where has Lightfinger Flip gone?"

Instead of replying to the question, the man caught his breath and shouted for help.

"Help! Murder! murder! Hel—"

"I reckon thet's whar you'll go fast enough," grimly observed Round-up Rube, as the word was cut short by a pull on the rope. "We'll hev ter give ye a through ticket, I 'low."

This time the man was allowed to swing so long that he was too weak to stand when lowered to the floor, and one of the cowboys was obliged to support him.

"Ang such a bloody fool!" muttered 'Andy' 'Arry. "E's a reg'ler mule, ye know! But, b' Jovel he's got ther grit!"

Again Pistol Peg was given a swallow of whisky, but it came near strangling him. Chris Comstock looked on in stern and unrelenting silence.

"I jes' reckon you'd best kep me up thar," huskily gasped the gritty tough. "Then I'd never had er chance ter blab, an' now ef I do blab, Flip will settle my hash the fust tim we meet."

"You need not be afraid of that," said Chris.

"When we lay our hands on him it will be to give him his just deserts. His days of crime are at an end. We have sworn to avenge our comrade, whom he killed, and we shall keep our word. If you blow on Flip, you will live much longer than you will if you do not. Speak out, man! Where has he gone?"

The tough thought of the torture he was sure to receive if he disobeyed this command, and he weakened. In a few moments the cowboy learned that Lightfinger Flip, with several of his satellites, had struck for an old hut among the mountains, carrying Nugget Nell with them, a captive.

"We will follow," decided Chris; "and you shall lead us, Pistol Peg. If you play us foul, death shall be your reward. Horses, pards, horses!"

"I must go with you!" cried Fred Anthropol, excitedly. "Just give me a few minutes, Chris, and I will have a horse, if I have to buy one. Do not go off and leave me!"

Then he rushed out of the cabin and dashed away into the darkness.

As Fred was hurrying along, two dark figures suddenly darted up behind him. Then came the sound of a heavy blow, and the young Easterner sunk to the ground without so much as a moan.

"Now, I'll cut his cussed throat!" softly snarled the voice of Whisky Jim.

"Hold hard, pard!" hissed Nevada Mike. "Member ther boss's orders!"

CHAPTER XII.

HOT WORK AT THE OLD HUT.

"DERN ther boss!" was Whisky Jim's retort.

"It'd be mighty unhealthy fer you ef he knew you said that," asserted Mike. "You kin say dern ther boss hyer, but you are skeered ter death of him w'en he is aroun'."

"Who's skeered? It's er lie! I hain't skeered of no livin' man!"

"Oh, come off, Jim! You oughter know you can't fool me. I've bin your pard long enough ter git your p'int down fine. I hain't ashamed ter acknowledge thar is one man as I am afeerd of, an' thet's Lightfinger Flip. I dunno w'at thar is about him, but thar's suthin' as makes a galoot mighty shy 'bout kickin' up a bobbery ag'in' his orders."

"Waal, w'at in blazes kin he want of this tenderfoot?"

"Thet hain't fer me to say; but we know his orders, an' I 'low we'd best stick by 'em."

"Ther ijee of our sackin' this critter clean ter ther Crow's Nest!"

"We'll only hev ter sack him ter ther bosses; they'll tote hin ther rest of ther way, an' us too."

But, the whisky tough was obstinate.

"Blamed ef I hain't a good mine ter stick him anyway an' take my charce with ther boss!"

"Don't ye do it, Jim, 'less ye wants er through ticket."

"We c'd sw'ar we had ter do it."

"Ther boss can't be fooled thet way."

"Waal, I've got er score erg'in' this greeny, an' I'd like ter know how I'm goin' ter wipe it out?"

"Don't ax me. But I 'lows ther boss don't love this critter any ter speak of. He's gittin' his han's on him fer a puppose. Thet's w'y he scooped ther gal."

"I dunno as I jes' understan'."

"Waal, them cow-punchers hev sworn ter wipe ther boss out, 'cause he salted one of their gang. Ef we hev ther gal an' ther tenderfoot, an' they catch ther boss, he kin say they'll never see gal ur greeny ef he is not set free. In thet way he'll hev ther deadwood on 'em. See?"

"I reckon."

"It's more'n probable thet you'll hev plenty of chance ter wipe out ther greeny in ther end, so le's not fool erway any more time in p'laver. Ketch holt!"

Jim put up his knife, with no little reluctance, and the Twin Toughs lifted the unconscious Easterner. Swiftly and silently they bore him through the darkness to the outskirts of the camp, where two horses were waiting.

In the darkness, Fred's hands and feet were hastily bound, then he was swung up in front of Nevada Mike.

The two desperadoes moved slowly and cautiously till they thought themselves far enough from town so the sound of their horses' hoofs would not be heard, then they struck a faster pace, and went galloping away into the hills.

By a mere chance, they had avoided detection by the cowboys. In vain Chris Comstock and his companions waited for Fred Anthropol to return.

Six miles from Hot Hole an old hut stood in a

secluded pocket. Straight to this hut the Twin Troughs bore their captive.

Lightfinger Flip and half a dozen of his satellites were waiting for Jim and Mike. Nugget Nell, saucy and defiant, was in their power.

"I hear the clatter of hoofs!" cried Flip, springing up. "It must be the boys are coming."

The cabin door was flung open to allow a flood of light to stream out into the darkness. This movement was greeted by a hoarse hail from the approaching horsemen.

A minute later the Twin Troughs reined in their horses in front of the hut.

"Hyer we are, boss," cheerfully announced Nevada Mike. "An' here's ther bird ye want."

"Good enough!" was the gambler's satisfied exclamation. "With the cards we now hold, we can easily do up our enemies."

"I hed ter fetch the critter a pritty hard belch," explained Mike; "but I reckon it didn't crack his cokernut, fer he hes bin groanin' door-in' ther las' ten minutes."

At Flip's order, Fred was carried into the hut, while one of the men looked after the horses.

The young Easterner was conscious, although he was still dazed in a measure.

Nugget Nell could not suppress a low exclamation when her eyes fell on Fred's face. She had heard the desperadoes speaking of securing another "bird," but she had not thought they meant the tenderfoot.

Fred also uttered an exclamation when his gaze met that of the singular girl, and at that moment, for the first time, he fully realized his situation.

Nell would have examined the young man's injury, but she was not permitted to do so, and Fred was dumped down in a corner, as if he were some inanimate thing.

"You have done well, boys!" declared Lightfinger Flip, addressing Jim and Mike. "I thought I could depend on you, and I see I was not deceived."

"We done ther best we c'u'd," assured the Nevada ruffian.

"And that is all I can ask. But, how about the cow-punchers? Were they making any stir when you left Hot Hole?"

"We didn't stop ter ax 'em," grinned Jim. "Somehow, we didn't feel like we hed any time ter spar, ye know."

"Then you know nothing of their movements?"

"Nuthin' 'cept thet they hed made er run on Pistol Peg."

At this Flip appeared somewhat surprised.

"I wonder how they tumbled to him?" he muttered. "But Peg is clear grit, and I do not think they will be able to pump him."

"Ef they sh'u'd—"

"If they should, we would know it in time. Dandy Jack is watching the cowboys. He will get word to us, if anything goes crooked."

"Wal, now I'll feel easier," nodded Mike. "Them galoots from Robinson Ranch are wussen p'ison, I'll lo."

"An' Chris Comstock's ther wu'st one of ther hull pot an' b'—," put in another. "He hain't much more'n a boy, but fer all thet, he's jest er holy horror on wheels—you hear me!"

At this there was a general muttering of assent.

Nevada Mike produced a bottle of liquor, which went the rounds. When it came to the whisky tough, Flip cautioned:

"Go light, Jim. You know you were more than half cocked when the tenderfoot knocked you off your pins in the saloon."

"Ef I hedn't bin, he'd never popped me over in thet way. But I'm in need of a bracer, fer I'm gittin' er leetle shaky it's bin so long since I hed a pull."

"Jim gits shaky ef thar hain't er stream runnin' down his throax all thet time," laughed Nevada Mike.

Cards followed the liquor, and the ruffianly crew gathered around a rough table to gamble and quarrel.

Nugget Nell watched her chance, and when it came, she crept softly nearer to the tenderfoot in the corner. Fred watched her approach helplessly.

Finally, while the ruffianly gang were laughing and swearing over an unusually large stake, she ventured to whisper:

"Keep up your courage. I have a knife and will cut your hands free when I get a chance." But, she was astonished and delighted to hear him reply:

"My hands are already free. They were tied

in a slack fashion, and I can cast off the rope any time."

"If they will drink enough," Nell whispered again, "we will find a way to give them the slip."

"We will find a way to give them the slip anyhow," assured Fred. "But, if we do not, Chris Comstock and his comrades will be here before morning. They were ready to start—or, about ready—before I fell into the hands of the two ruffians who brought me here."

At this, the girl laughed outright with delight, and Lightfinger Flip turned toward them, with a savage oath.

"Here, here!" he cried, springing up and coming toward them. "This won't do! I reckon we will have to truss you up, my pretty, or you will be setting the tenderfoot free."

Nell sprung up and faced him defiantly, her blue eyes flashing.

"Lay a hand on me if you dare!" she cried.

The gambler paused in admiration.

"Well, you do make a pretty picture!" he averred. "By Jove! I did not dream you were half so handsome!"

Nell gave him a look of scorn and contempt.

"You would make a card on the stage," was his laughing assertion. "Now, if I should take a fancy to kiss you, what would you do?"

"Try it and see!"

"By gracious! I will!"

As he sprung forward, she attempted to flash out the knife which she grasped beneath her dress, but he caught her in his arms before she could succeed.

"Oh! so you have a weapon there! Well, never mind. You cannot use it, and now I will have the kiss."

He did not get it.

With a twisting wrench of hands and feet, Fred Anthrop burst the slovenly-arranged bonds that held him. In another moment he was on his feet, and with a leap, he reached the man and girl.

Before the card-sharp could realize what had happened, he felt the girl torn from his arms, then came a shock that caused a million lights to flash before his eyes, and he measured his length on the floor!

Shouts and oaths of amazement broke from the gang of desperadoes, as they leaped to their feet. They were between our friends and the door, so escape in that direction was cut off.

"Hang my onery cle eyes!" howled Whisky Jim. "Ther tenderfut hes bruck loose!"

The ruffian drew his wicked-looking knife, a chuckle of fiendish satisfaction escaping his lips as he thought the time had come to wipe out the score against Fred Anthrop.

With Nugget Nell on his arm, the plucky young Easterner retreated to the wall.

The girl flashed out her knife and faced the ruffians of the hut, scornful defiance written on her pretty face.

Swearing like a pirate, Lightfinger Flip half arose and sat glaring at the youth who had knocked him down.

"Shell we wipe him out, boss?" eagerly asked Nevada Mike.

"No!" snarled the gambler, getting upon his feet. "I will do that myself!"

"Come on!" cried Fred, fearlessly. "Come on with your whole ruffianly gang! Bare-handed I will meet you!"

He knew it was useless to expect any mercy after what had happened, yet he was undaunted.

"You had better give up quietly," hissed Lightfinger Flip. "You cannot hope to hold out against us, and you will only receive rougher treatment if you make us trouble."

The young tenderfoot laughed, scornfully.

"If you take me again, you will have to fight for the satisfaction. I may get a chance to crack you again, you double-dyed dastard! and that will be sufficient remuneration for the rough handling I shall receive."

"Let us at him, boss!" urged Whisky Jim.

"Stop—listen!"

The gambler paused in a listening attitude. In a moment he cried:

"Some one is coming! I can hear the beat of a horse's hoofs!"

He leaped to the door and flung it open. As he did so, a hail came out of the darkness, and the clatter of hoofs was heard by every man.

"It must be Chris and his friends are coming," excitedly exclaimed Fred Anthrop.

"No," returned Nell, "it is one of this crew of desperadoes who hailed."

Nearer and nearer came the galloping horse, till it was reined on its haunches at the very door.

"Dandy Jack!"

The name burst from the lips of Lightfinger

Flip and his satellites as they saw the face of the man on the horse.

"What's up?" demanded the gambler.

"Ther devil's ter pay!" was the instant reply. "You fellers hev got ter git outter this instanter!"

"What for?"

"Ther cow-punchers hev squeezed ther truth outter Pistol Peg, an' they are makin' him lead 'em hyer. They are pritty nigh hyer now. I jest barely managed ter cut in erhead of 'em!"

It is impossible to describe the consternation this announcement created. A chorus of furious oaths and imprecations broke from the lips of the men who heard it.

"Scoop the tenderfoot and the girl, lads!" cried Lightfinger Flip. "Then we will get to horse and slide out of this about as lively as possible."

A sudden hoarse shout came from the darkness close at hand—a shout that filled more than one heart with fear. The next moment a tall form sprung past Dandy Jack and dashed into the hut, knocking down two of the ruffians with two swinging blows of the right and left hands.

"The day of Judgment is coming! Fly, fly, fly from the wrath of the Most High! The mountains shall rock and be rent asunder and the grave shall give up its dead! Ha! ha! ha!"

It was Old Rattlebrain, and, although unarmed, the strange man waded into the desperadoes, swinging his clinched fists back and forth, knocking men over like ten-pins!

With a shout, Fred Anthrop seized a cudgel of wood and leaped forward to the old man's assistance, dealing terrible blows right and left!

CHAPTER XIII.

ADRIFT IN THE DARKNESS.

THE astounded ruffians were only able to offer a feeble and ineffectual resistance, for the tornado-like attack was so unexpected they were in no way prepared for it.

"Down, devils, down!" thundered the mountain maniac, as he dealt sledge-hammer-like blows which sent the men reeling to the floor.

Fred Anthrop succeeded in getting in one or two effective blows with his cudgel, but he took particular pains to keep beyond reach of the madman's fearful blows.

Suddenly the light was dashed out and the room plunged into darkness. Still the strange battle continued, the air being laden with the thud of falling blows and the groans and cries of the discomfited desperadoes.

Fred had noticed Nugget Nell's position just as the light was extinguished, and by rare good fortune, he easily reached her side and grasped her hand.

"Come!" he said, in a low tone.

Together they darted out of the old hut, not heeding Dandy Jack's cry to them. The bullet which the man on the horse sent whistling past them but hurried them on, and they quickly disappeared in the darkness.

"It seems too bad to leave that wonderful old man in that nest of monsters," declared the girl, half-pausing and listening to the shouts which still could be faintly heard.

"That is true," acknowledged Fred; "but the moment the light was extinguished, I could do nothing further to aid him. In the darkness I might have struck him instead of one of Lightfinger Flip's gang. But, I fancy he will take care of himself. He is a perfect Samson. I saw him lift two men above his head as if they were children."

"It must be he is crazy."

"There is not a doubt about that, yet there seems to be a method in his madness. He knows Lightfinger Flip, and the gambler stands in mortal terror of him. I fancy Flip tried to kill him at some time in the past—But, we had better hurry on away from this pocket. The gang will look for us as soon as Old Rattlebrain gives them a chance."

Together they hurried on into the darkness, taking little heed of the direction they pursued so long as it carried them from the lone hut. Soon they could no longer hear the sounds which issued from the cabin.

In the darkness they made their way out of the pocket and started at random through the hills, trusting Providence to guide them. As they walked along, they fell into conversation.

"I have you to thank for my life," said Fred. "But for you, Whisky Jim would have cut my throat."

"I did what I could," was her simple reply: "but, I fancy that would have been ineffectual if Chris had not chipped in. Oh, is he not a brave and noble fellow?"

Little she knew of the pang her enthusiastic words gave her companion. For an instant,

Fred's heart was hot against the manly young cowboy who had once been the cause of his failure in an affair of the heart, but, when he thought how truly brave and noble Chris was, he firmly replied:

"He is indeed all of that, Miss Nell. Chris and I were schoolmates."

"Oh, then you must know his other name! At the ranch, no one seemed to know it. What is it?"

"I do not fancy he has any reason for keeping it a secret longer, so I will tell you. It is Comstock."

"And what made him want to keep it a secret anyway?"

"Well, he was engaged in an unfortunate affair that he believed had a fatal termination."

"Oh, I am becoming greatly interested! What kind of an affair—a duel?"

"You have guessed it."

"And with whom?" persisted the inquisitive girl. "You will tell me, won't you?"

Fred laughed.

"With me."

"You?"

"Yes."

For several moments Nell was too astonished to ask further questions, but she finally gasped:

"And he didn't kill you?"

Then as the ridiculousness of her question dawned on her, she joined in Fred's laugh, saying:

"Of course he didn't, or you would not be here! But, it is very strange! It must be you fought over some fair maiden."

It was well for the young tenderfoot that the darkness hid his face at that moment. Nell did not wait for him to reply, but rattled on:

"And he thought you were dead, so he ran away. That is it—that is the reason why he did not let any one know what his true name was. And you turned up alive. How astounded he must have been!"

"He was, indeed. But, I wish to ask you another question: Was it you who pushed me over when I was tied in the chair in the saloon and the lights were extinguished?"

"I suppose so," she confessed. "Anyhow, I tried to push you over, for I thought you could not defend yourself, and that wretch with the knife might kill you in the dark."

"I thought it was you. What do I not owe to you! But for you, I should be dead now!"

"Oh, perhaps not."

"It looks that way. Anything I can do—"

"You have made the account square already."

"How?" asked Fred, as if a trifle disappointed.

"In knocking down the gambler back in the hut as he was about to kiss me. That squares the score. You did that job in a very neat and scientific manner."

Fred's blood leaped at her words of praise.

"That was nothing," he declared. "I am ready to do anything in my power for you. I will defend you with my life."

"I thank you, but I hope I shall be able to defend myself. Thus far I have managed to look out for number one quite well."

"I am afraid I do not understand it. It seems singular that you should be roaming around this wild section of the country with only a negro as a companion."

"I reckon you do not know Pete, for if you did you would not say 'only a negro.' He is as faithful as a dog and as true as steel. I place the utmost confidence in him, and he would lay down his life for me, if necessary. Oh, Pete is a daisy, I tell you that!"

"But where are your father and mother, if I may take the liberty to ask?"

"My mother is dead; my father—God only knows if he lives."

"How is that?"

"I have not seen him since I was a little child. He went away to make his fortune, and he never returned. Mother always looked for him. She would not believe him dead, and on her deathbed she made me promise to try and find him, and tell him she remained forever true to him. She placed me in the care of Pete, who had been our faithful servant for years."

"And you are looking for your father now?"

"Yes."

"Have you reasons to believe he is in this part of the country?"

"I know nothing save that he went West thirteen years ago, to make his fortune in the mines."

To Fred it seemed a useless search, but he refrained from saying so.

And thus they wandered on through the darkness, little heeding whither they went.

The night was nearly spent, and the approach

of dawn was not far away. Still, as there was no moon, and the sky was overcast, the darkness was dense. They could only proceed with caution.

Struck by a sudden thought, Fred exclaimed:

"If we had remained near the pocket where the old hut is, we should have been enabled to join Chris and his comrades when they arrived. The man on the horse brought word of their approach. We have made an error."

As he expressed this conviction, they were both startled by hearing a voice that cried to them from out of the darkness near at hand:

"Halt!"

CHAPTER XIV.

'ANDY 'ARRY IS "HAROUND."

THEY paused in consternation.

"Jes' yo' keep yo' distance dar!" cried the voice. "I's a powerful dang'r'us nigger to fool wif. I hain't gwine ter stan' no monkey-shines, yo' kin'pend on dat."

Nugget Nell uttered a cry of delight.

"It's Pete!" she exclaimed, hurrying forward.

"Bress de Good Lawd!" shouted the voice of the darky. "Am dat really yo', Missy Nell?"

"Yes, it is I, Pete."

In another moment, the girl and the faithful darky were clasped in each other's arms.

"Oh, chile, chile!" almost sobbed the negro. "I's monst'rus glad to fine yo', fo' I did fink one time dat I'd nebber see yo' no mo'! Dis jes' meeks me feel good enough to shout glory hallelujum!"

"But how in the world is it you are here?"

"W'en dey took yo' to de cabin back in de town, I jes' follows 'em 'long wid a cowboy. Atter dey gits in de cabin, de cowboy he say fo' me to keep watch wile he goes fo' Massa Chris an' de odders. Wile he wur gone, dey tek yo' out an' kerry yo' away. I didn't hab no hoss, 'cept Shanks' mare, but I jes' tuck atter dem critters lek all possessed. I allus used ter be quite a boy on de hoof, but dem hosses wur too much fo' me, an' dey gits away out heur in de hills. Atter dat I tries to git back to de town, but I done reckum I mus' hab los' my way. Dat's how I happen to be heur."

"It seems as if Providence must have brought us together."

"Dat's a fac'. Provermdence do act powerful strange sometime, chile. But, who am dat wif yo'?"

"A friend who helped me to escape from those bad men."

"Den, by golly! I jes' wan' to git holt ob his han'! Lawdy me! but I's pow'ful tickled to see yo', sar! I jes' 'low yo' mus' be made ob de right kine ob stuff if yo' holp Missy Nell to 'scape."

"He knocked Lightfinger Flip down with his fist."

"Ki-yi! Wish I had bin dar to see de fun! Dat feller am drefful tough. He'll mek a powerful sizzlin' w'en de Ole Boy chucks him in de fire. I'd jes' lek de job to ten' dat part ob de furnace whar he am roasted. I'd keep one mighty hot fire."

"Miss Nell had just been telling me of you when you called for us to halt," said Fred.

"Spec' yo' fought yo' wur cotched ag'in, didn't yo'?"

"We thought it possible we had again run into our enemies."

"Dat's a joke on yo'. But, now de question am: how's we gwine to git back to de town? I 'low I dunno de way."

"And we are no better off. We seem to be lost in the darkness."

"Dat am so, an' dat meek's me fink ob a song. Jes' yo' wait tell I gits my banjo an' strikes de tune."

Pete had clung tight to his beloved banjo till he rushed forward to clasp his mistress in his arms. After a moment, he found it where he had dropped it, and a chuckle of delight came from his lips as he discovered the instrument was unharmed.

"Jes' yo' peoples sot right do'n on de groun'," he advised, setting the example. "I's felt pow'ful kine ob squ'amish fo' a wile back, but I's feelin' bettah now, an' I's goin' to sing. Dis am a song ob my own proposin', an' I jes' 'lows it fits de 'casion berry well."

They threw themselves down on the ground, and Pete proceeded to get his banjo in tune.

"I tell yo' dis am a first-class instrumen'," he asserted, as he struck the strings softly. "It hab stood some drefful hard rackets, but it comes up smilin' ebery time. Jes' yo' lissen to dat! Dat's w'at I calls sweet!"

He softly played a piece, of mellow tones, which indeed sounded sweet in the darkness.

"Now, I will gib yo' dat song. Heur she go!" In his own peculiar manner, he rendered the following song:

"Oh, Lawd! hab mercy on de sinner dat's los' in de dark—

Oh, Lawd, hab mercy!
Dar's room fo' yo' chilun' in de big white ark—
Oh, Lawd, hab mercy!

"Fo' we's waitin' fo' de break ob de Jedgment Day,
W'en de shadders ob de night shall roll away
An' de glory ob de sun d' shines in de sky
Shall show us de Lan' ob de Sweet By an' By.

"Dar wur Abr'am wid de knife an' his son on de pile—

Oh, Lawd, hab mercy!
Hab mercy, Bressed L'rd, on de poor man's chile!
Oh, Lawd, hab mercy!

"Fo' we's waitin' fo' de break ob de Jedgment Day,
W'en de shadders ob de night—"

"Hush—listen!"

It was Nell who spoke, and her hand fell on the darky's arm. The song was interrupted, and the three listened.

They plainly heard the sound of horses' hoofs. "There are hcrsem' coming this way!" exclaimed Fred. "It's probably Lightfinger Flip and his gang! We must not be discovered!"

Hastily they sprung up.

"This way!" said Fred, in a low tone.

He led the way to a spot where they would be in little danger of being discovered by the night riders, and they crouched down together.

Nearer and nearer came the horsemen. Finally they swept past and continued on into the darkness. As they did so, Fred sprung up, with an exclamation.

"I believe those were Chris Comstock and his friends!" he cried.

"I jes' bet dat's so!" agreed Pete.

Fred instantly uttered a loud hail, but the night riders were too far away to hear. In a short time the sound of their horses' feet died out in the distance.

"Well," half-laughed the young Easterner, "we are no worse off than before."

"But, dat's bad enough. We dunno any which way ter turn. Bress my stars! but dis am a fix!"

"Morning cannot be far away," declared the girl. "See. I fancy it is beginning to grow light in the east."

"I dunno's we'll be much bettah off den, fo' de light won't tell us de way back to Hot Hole!"

Dawn was indeed approaching, and in a short time it had grown visibly lighter.

The three started out at random, trusting Providence to guide them in the right direction.

Near sunrise they were startled by a hail.

"Ello, therel 'Old hon! Hi want to hinqwire the way to 'Ot 'Ole. Lawst this bloody country?"

'Andy 'Arry appeared, leading a decidedly disreputable mule. His clothes were dusty and torn and he had the general appearance of one who had met with a mishap of some sort. It was noticeable that he limped as he came forward.

"Great golly!" laughed Pete. "Jes' looker dat feller! Dat is eno' to mek a cat snicker! Whar—whar's de mat 'n' wid yo', pusson?"

"Hit is this hinfert mule!" spluttered the Londoner, giving the other a vicious jerk. "Satan 'imself could not ride the bloody beast!"

"W'y, dat's a peaceable lookin' mule," asserted the darky. "Looks lek he wur hafe asleep. I don' reckon dar's any life in dat critter. Bet a cent yo' dunno how to ride anyhow."

The Englishman lifted his battered hat to Nell and scowled at Fred. Then he turned sharply on the negro.

"You don't know what you hare talking habout!" he snapped. "Hi 'ave 'ad hexperience with this mule. Hi started hout with the cowboys, but the confounded banimal played me foul, b'Jove! I tried to keep hup, but 'e honly crawled till hafter the hothers were hent hof the way. Hafter that, 'e hup hand went hit like a streak hof lightning, ye know. Hi could honly 'old hon hand yell for 'elp, but there was no 'elp for me. After a while, 'e stopped so sudden dat Hi went sailing hover his 'ead. Hi say blawst the bloody mule!"

Pete walked slowly round the animal, which seemed to be sleeping with its head drooping low. The darky could not repress a snort of contempt. "Anybody kin ride dat critter!" he asserted. "I'll bet he wouldn't stir ef yo' should jab an inch brad right inter him."

"Hi would like to see you ride 'im. 'E would show you a thing hor two."

"Well, I'll jes' show yo' a thing or two," de-

clared the darky, who was not inclined to take a dare. "I hab ridden wile hosses, boss, an' it uster be a favorite sport ob mine to ride de 'gators roun' de bayous do'n in ole Lou's anny. Jes' somebody hole my banjo wile I tackle dis case ob sonnambulism—jum-mum. Golly! dat word lek to bruck my ja!"

He passed his banjo to Nell, then he walked up to the mule, bent over and looked the animal in the face. The beast seemed asleep, but half-opened one eye as Pete was staring at it.

"Oh, yo' 's playin' 'possum, am yo'!" cried the negro. "Well, yo' can't fool dis chile, an' yo' wants to put dat do'n in yo' memerandums-book. I's gwine ter git on yo' back, critter, an' when I gits dar yo'll fine se a stayer."

He backed off several steps and spat on his hands. Then he crept cautiously up to the mule and quickly sprung upon its back. The creature's eyes came open with a snap, but it seemed too astounded to make an immediate move or even to lift its head.

"Oh, by golly!" laughed the darky. "He didn't eben wiggle! Git up, dar, yo' sleepy-head!"

He sawed at the bridle and thumped the creature's sides with his feet. Still the mule did not stir.

"Reckum he's paralyzed. Nuffin' but de shock ob a 'lectric battery will mek dis critter start."

Then he bent over and yelled in the animal's left ear:

"Will—yo'—git—up?"

As if he had really received an electric shock, the mule started. With a shrill squeal, it bounded forward for a distance of two or three rods, like an arrow shot from a bow, then it came to a sudden halt, and Pete went flying over the tricky creature's head, landing on his stomach.

"Say, dat hain't fair!" cried the darky, as soon as he could catch his breath. "W'y fo' didn' yo' let a feller know yo' wur gwine ter do dat? By jinkums! dat critter hab gone to sleep again!"

The mule indeed stood with lowered head and closed eyes.

Slowly the darky arose to his feet, carefully feeling of his arms and legs.

"Guess I am all heur," he muttered. "Don' nuffin' seem to be bruck. By Jim! dat am a powerful onstiddy critter! I jes' don' beleebe he kin play dat on me erg'in."

"You had better look out, Pete," cautioned Nell. "I am afraid the beast will hurt you."

This touched the darky's vanity.

"Well, I guess not!" he nodded, decisively. "Dat animal hain't built right. I wasn't jes' ready dat odder time, but I'll try him ag'in."

Once more he cautiously mounted the mule, but he had no time to utter a word before the animal darted away like a frightened deer. Pete clasped it around the neck and held on for dear life. In that manner darky and mule disappeared beyond a bend in the defile.

CHAPTER XV.

THE CARD-SHARP BALKS THE WAY.

"'OLD hon there!" shouted 'Andy 'Arry. "That hanimal is honly 'ired, hand hif you run haway with 'hit, Hi shall 'av to pay for the hinferral beast."

"He is not running away with the mule," said Fred.

"But, the mule is running away with him," put in Nugget Nell, laughingly.

"This is just my blawed bloody luck!" moaned the Englishman, disgust written on his face. "Hi 'ave met with nothing but misfortune since Hi came to this 'e then country. Hi wish Hi was back hin hold Hengland!"

"Pete will bring back the mule," assured the girl. "He is too proud to return without the animal."

"Well 'ere Hi ham hafoot," mumbled 'Arry. "Hany one would take me for a common tramp! 'Eavenly mercy! 'Ow hannyoying!"

His companions could not refrain from laughing at his disgust and annoyance.

"It is a little tough on a man of your standing," said Fred.

"Tough—tough!" cried 'Arry. "That is no name for hit! Hit was bad henough to take a common mule, when Hi ham hin the 'abit hof riding be'ind a four-hin' and when Hi ham hat 'ome; but to tramp hoyer the country like a vagabond is what completely hupsets me. Hi wish Hi 'ad never seen this 'retched country!"

"Well, you may as well b'ace up and make the best of it. We are trying to find the way to Hot Hole. You can tramp along with us, if you wish."

"But, 'ow habout that mule?"

"We are going in the direction taken by Pete

and the mule. It is possible we may overtake them."

"Well, Hi suppose hit is the best Hi can do, so Hi will 'ave to succumb to fate."

So the three started onward together, following after the darky and the mule. 'Andy 'Arry continued to grumble, but both Fred and Nell appeared light-hearted. The girl could play the banjo some, and she drummed out a march as they trudged along.

The sun was now fairly up and the birds were calling to each other on either hand. Another day was inaugurated.

For an hour they continued onward, vainly looking for the negro and the mule. It was plain the darky had clung fast to the animal and had been carried no little distance.

"This does seem a bit discouraging," confessed Fred, as they came to a halt. "We may be moving directly from Hot Hole, instead of toward it."

"But, what can we do?" asked the girl. "We must find our way back to camp somehow. My horse and Pete are there. It seems as if we must strike a trail some time."

"I am not so sure of that. This is a pretty wild section, and, besides Hot Hole, there are no camps that I know of for many scores of miles on either hand."

'Arry flung himself on the ground, in despair.

"Hi suppose Hi 'ave come to this blawsted country to get lost hand starve to death!" he moaned. "What a awful fate! Hand Hi 'ave all the winnings hof last night's game hof poker hin me pocket! Oh, 'eavens!"

They sat down and discussed the situation. While they were thus occupied, they were startled by the distant clatter of hoofs.

"The nigger is coming back with the mule!" cried 'Arry, starting up.

"The sounds come from the wrong direction!" exclaimed the young Easterner. "Besides that, there are more than one horseman! Perhaps Lightfinger Flip and his pals are coming!"

They looked around for some place of concealment, but there was none near at hand.

"If it is those ruffians, we are in a bad fix," said Fred, grimly.

'Arry produced a pair of heavy revolvers and handed one to the tenderfoot.

"We will defend hourseelves to the best hof hour hability," were the words which fell from his lips. "'Ere hare some rocks. Let's get hin be'ind them has soon has possible. Per'aps we will not be discovered hif we lay low."

But, there was little chance of their avoiding discovery, a fact which the Englishman well understood. However, they quickly took refuge behind the rocks, which could serve them as a breastwork.

Nearer and nearer came the horsemen, till they burst into view. As they appeared, a cry of delight came from Nugget Nell's lips.

"It is Chris and his friends!"

It was in truth the young cowboy and his pards. Fred Anthrop instantly sprang to his feet and waved his hat round his head, giving utterance to a shout of welcome. 'Andy 'Arry sprang upon one of the bowlders and executed a dance of joy, whooping like a wild Indian.

"B'Jove!" he yelled. "Hi ham saved! Hi shall return to hold Hengland hagain!"

As the cowboys drew rein, themselves uttering shouts of satisfaction, Nugget Nell ran toward Chris, who promptly swung himself down from the saddle.

"Oh, Chris, Chris!" she cried, impulsively catching hold of his hands. "You do not know how glad we are to see you! I am so pleased I could kiss you!"

"Could you, indeed?" exclaimed the gallant young cattleman. "Then I will—"

He did not complete the sentence, but he stooped down and suddenly kissed her. She started back, her face becoming crimson.

As Chris lifted his head, his eyes met Fred Anthrop's fairly. The young Easterner was white as a corpse, and there was a look on his face that the cowboy never forgot. It was a look of mingled pain and despair that struck straight at Chris Comstock's heart.

"He loves her!" was the thought which flashed through the young cattleman's head. "We are rivals again!"

But, this thought brought no feeling of hatred. He stepped toward his old schoolmate, with outstretched hand.

For a single instant Fred Anthrop hesitated, then he took the proffered hand, saying, a trifle huskily:

"We are glad to see you, Chris, for we were lost and did not know the direction to pursue in order to reach Hot Hole."

"That is a fact," nodded 'Andy 'Arry. Hi thought Hi was going to starve to death with hall that boodle hin me pocket hand get no chance to blow hit hin. B'Jove! that was hawful to contemplate!"

"But, we supposed at least two of this party were captives in the hands of Lightfinger Flip and his gang. How did you escape?"

Explanations followed.

"Well," laughed Chris, "Old Rattlebrain has done more than one good turn, if he is crazy. He always seems to turn up at some critical moment."

"Did the fellow you choked lead you haright?" asked 'Arry.

"He led us all right enough, but when we arrived at the old hut, we found it in flames and the ruffians we were looking after gone. They escaped us."

"But we'll fine 'em yit," growled Round-up Rube. "We hain't goin' ter let thet derved gambler git off, you kin bet yer boots on thet!"

This caused an ominous muttering to come from the other cowboys.

The entire party dismounted to give themselves and their horses a slight rest.

After a short time, Chris tossed the bridle-rein of his horse to Round-up Rube and motioned to Fred Anthrop. Passing his arm through that of the young Easterner, he led him away, only pausing when they were beyond sight and hearing of the others.

"Fred," said the cowboy, "there is something I wish to speak to you about."

Fred bowed, a trifle stiffly.

"Go on," he said.

But, Chris did not find it easy to go on. He cleared his throat and looked confused for a moment, half turning away. Then he wheeled back, resolutely, and faced his old schoolmate squarely.

"We were rivals once," he said.

Again Fred bowed.

"And we made fools of ourselves," Chris continued.

"That is sure."

"Under similar circumstances, we would not repeat our folly."

"I should hope not!"

"We are older and somewhat wiser. But, it seems that fate is determined to make us rivals."

Fred said nothing, but stood gazing downward, softly kicking a tuft of grass with his foot.

"Fred."

"Well?"

"You are in love with Nugget Nell."

"I shall not deny it."

"You do love her?"

"Yes."

"And so do I."

Fred lifted his head and their eyes met, but there was not a trace of anger on either face.

"You have known her the longer," said the young Easterner, slowly. "Perhaps it is not right I should come across your path. If it is—"

"Stop! Neither of us have known her very long. With her negro companion she came to the ranch, and Cy Robinson induced her to remain for a time as a companion for his daughter. I became acquainted with her there, but I will confess I could not understand her, she is so unlike other girls. I attempted to be quite friendly, but she repulsed me and held me at arm's length, although I fancied she did not dislike me. When she left for Hot Hole, I found an excuse to follow. With the boys who are with me, I came to Hot Hole for the ostensible purpose of looking after Rube Randall, but principally to see Nell again. She greeted me so warmly that I took courage, but now—"

"Now," said Fred, "I have appeared. But, what of that? She has given me no encouragement. I may not be in the race at all."

"And you may be in for a winner. Who can tell?"

"Is it to make us enemies?"

"No—a thousand times no! It shall be a friendly contest, and may the most fortunate man win—as he surely will."

"Whoever succeeds he shall not lose the friendship of the other?"

"That is right."

"And everything shall be fair and above-board."

"Yes."

Fred held out his hand, which Chris promptly took.

"This seals the compact," declared the cowboy, soberly. "If you get her, Fred, you shall have my best wishes."

"And it shall be the same if you are the for-

fortunate one. We will stand by each other, whatever may come."

A few moments later, they walked back and rejoined the rest of the party.

"It's time we wuz movin', pard," observed Round-up Rube.

"Well," said Chris, "one of us will have to show our friends here the way to Hot Hole. Who shall it be?"

No one volunteered.

"We would all accompany you back to the camp," explained Chris; "but we are not satisfied to give up the search just yet. We started out to find Lightfinger Flip, and we mean to find him, if possible."

"You will hev ter detail one of us, Chris, boy," nodded the bow-legged cowboy. "That's ther quickest way outer it, an I don't reckon none o' us will kick, though we'd all like ter be in at ther round-up o' ther cuss w'at shot pore Jimson."

Chris named one of the party, and the man selected took Nugget Nell behind him on his horse.

"B'Jove! hit looks as hif we would 'ave to foot hit," observed 'Andy 'Arry to Fred.

"I cannot see any other way for you," laughed Chris. "But, it is not many miles to Hot Hole."

"We are good for it," laughed the tenderfoot.

"Oh, yes," agreed 'Arry, "we hare good for hit, but Hif'll be 'anged hif hit doesn't come kind hof 'ard hof a man that is hin the 'abit hof ridin' be'ind a four-hin-and!"

The entire party proceeded a short distance together, then the cowboys turned aside, while the others kept on toward the mining-camp, guided by the man Chris Comstock had detailed.

"Hif Hi honly, 'ad that mule now!" mumbled the Londoner.

"You need not worry about the beast," assured Nell. "Pete will certainly bring him into Hot Hole. Never yet have I known that darky to become lost so that he could not find his way after a time."

"But, the blawsted mule may get haway from 'im."

"I do not think so. Pete was determined to ride the animal, and the last we saw of him, he was sticking like a burr. He is bound to stick as long as possible."

Fred Anthrop was strangely quiet, trudging along soberly. Nell noticed this and attempted to rally him, but he did not brighten up much. He was thinking of his own unfortunate situation—of the black cloud that hung over his head.

For a time they moved onward in silence. Suddenly passing round a bend, they came face to face with a party of men who seemed waiting to receive them.

"Ho, ho!" chuckled a familiar voice. "Here are the very birds I am looking for. They have kindly walked straight into the snare. Well, this is what I call luck of the first degree! Hands up, there! We hold the drop!"

The speaker was the gambler, Lightfinger Flip!

CHAPTER XVI.

IN A TIGHT CORNER.

"'ANG my bloody heves!" gasped 'Andy 'Arry. "'Ere's a go, b'Jove!"

Fred Anthrop grasped the butt of the revolver given him by the Englishman some time before, but the clear, cold voice of the card-sharp prevented him from drawing the weapon.

"Down you go, tenderfoot, with a bullet in your brain, as surely as you try to draw that weapon! My men hold the drop, and when they pull trigger it means cold meat."

Dale, the cowboy, comprehended the situation, and muttered, warningly:

"Slow, slow, lad! You will be committin' suicide ef ye tries ter git out yer shooter now. Wait a bit an' watch yer chance."

Fred decided it was best to follow this advice.

"That is where you are sensible," nodded Lightfinger Flip, as he saw the Easterner's hand fall from the weapon. "You can not have a desire to shuffle off the mortal coil just now. But I have a little score to settle with you."

"He will seek vengeance for the blow you gave him!" whispered Nugget Nell, a tremor in her voice.

"'Eavens hand hearth!" gurgled the Londoner. "Hi wish Hi was back hin hold Hengland! This is a reg'ler land hof bloody pirates hand 'ighwaymen!"

"W'at d'yer want of us?" demanded the cowboy. "W'at d'yer mean by blockin' our path in this yere way?"

"I mean business," was Flip's reply. "You are the very people I am looking for."

"But, we weren't lookin' fer you, not by er derved sight!"

"I suppose not, but some of your friends are. All the same, they will have to keep on looking. It is much easier to look for me than to catch me."

"Your day will come."

"Oh, that is sure; but, I do not reckon it is very near. I have been through too many hot rackets to be afraid of a posse of common cow-punchers."

"You will fine that cow-punchers are ther most danger'us critters in ther worl'. They hain't ther lads as putts up with any foolin'. Ther score shows er'mighty black mark ag'in' ye, an' it's shore ter be squared sooner ur later—you hear me!"

"Oh, stow this talk! I am not here for gab. Up with your hands, if you do not want to eat lead!"

"Reckon we've got ter do it," growled Dale, slowly and reluctantly lifting his hands above his head. "It's er mighty hard pill ter swaller, I tell you!"

"That is right," fell from the gambler's lips, as he saw the little party obey his order. "By that you show your good sense. Now—Thunder and blazes!"

There was a clatter of hoofs and the hoarse braying of a mule, then Pete and his "untamed steed" appeared and charged directly through the midst of the ruffianly gang, scattering them right and left.

"Look out fo' dis yer' critter!" shouted the negro, warningly. "He am a reg'ler slyclone on trucks, an' don' yo' fergit dat! Look out fo' his hoofs! He's a kicker frum Kickersville, yo' bet! Whoa dar, yo' onery critter! Whoa, I say! I'll jes' bre'k yo' neck w'en yo' do stop!"

The mule came to a sudden halt, but it was plain the negro was prepared for such a trick, as he clung fast.

"No, yo' don' play dat on dis chile!" he chuckled. "I's bin dar befo'! Oh, say! hole on! No, I mean let go! Ouch! Quit yo' pinchin'!"

The vicious animal had twisted its head around and seized Pete by a convenient part of the pantaloons, nipping a bit of flesh at the same time. But, although the darky set up a series of terrific squeals, the animal did not relinquish its hold. With a strong surge, it pulled the rider from its back.

"Great golly!" squawked Pete. "I jes' reckon I'se a goner dis time fo' suah! Oh, holy hebens ter mercy! Dat annymule am goin' ter play clock an' use me fo' de penjulum!"

The mule clung fast to the darky's breeches and, by tossing its head, swung the poor fellow back and forward something like a pendulum. Pete looked like a huge frog, having his arms and legs outspread.

"Somebody jes' shoot dat muel!" he spluttered, vainly clawing at the ground. "If I ebber surwibe dis, I'll hab him incarcerated fo' laceration ob my feelin's. I'll beta button he'll tear a big hole right in de nameless part ob my bran' new Sunday-go-to-meetin' pantjuloons! Oh, my ginger!"

The animal suddenly released his hold, and the darky fell to the ground. Slowly he rolled over and sat up, looking the mule fairly in the face, with his black nose almost touching the animal's muzzle.

"Now looker dat!" he gasped. "I hope ter die afo' I'm nine billion year ole if dat order-nary wu'thless critter habn't gone plum to sleep!"

With drooping head and closed eyes, the mule indeed appeared asleep.

Angered by the treatment he had received, Pete promptly slapped the animal, at the same time whirling over on his hands and knees to get upon his feet.

But, the mule whirled at the same time, launching out with its heels. Pete's pantaloons were struck in the very place where the mule's teeth had gripped them a short time before, and the unlucky negro plowed up the dust with his nose.

"Gug-gug-gug-gre't ginger!" he gurgled, as he sat up and clawed the dust out of his eyes. "Wuffo' wur dat w'at hit me? Felt lek I wur struck by a batterin'-ram! Reckum de skin am all ripped offen de forward end ob my nasal predominance! Oh, hain't I havin' a bully time!"

Some of the men with Lightfinger Flip could not repress their merriment, but not a smile changed the countenance of the gambler himself.

"Get up and get out of the way, you black fool!" he cried. "Be lively about it too, or I will shoot you!"

Dale, the cowboy, had improved the opportunity offered by the disturbance created by the advent of Pete and the mule. Quietly he had slid off his horse, bringing the animal's body between himself and the desperadoes, at the same time drawing a pair of heavy self-cocking revolvers. At a word from the cowboy, Nugget Nell also placed the body of the horse between herself and the ruffianly crew.

"Hold bard, Lightfinger Flip!" cried Dale, as the gambler threatened to shoot the negro. "I hold the drop now, and if you pull trigger I'll send ye down with er bullet in yer black heart! Do you hear my gentle murmur?"

Flip uttered an oath, followed by a laugh.

"So you are showing your teeth!" he cried. "You act as if you thought me a fool."

"Fool or not, I know w'en I hold ther winnin' keards."

"And you think you hold them now?"

"You bet!"

"That is where you deceive yourself. Two of my men are behind your party and have you lined with Winchester. They can wipe the whole crowd out in no time."

Dale did not look round, but he quietly asked Fred Anthrop to do so.

"See ef ther critter is lyin'," he said.

The young Easterner uttered an exclamation of dismay.

"He has told the truth," he declared.

"Then we are trapped for sure," confessed Dale.

"You see how it is," called Flip. "You may as well surrender without a struggle. It will be better for you to do so, for the girl might get hurt if the boys were obliged to open on you. Now, hold steady and we will be with you."

A moment later, he advanced, his dastardly satellites accompanying him.

Our friends were helpless to resist, and in a few moments they were made prisoners.

"'Eavens mercy!" moaned 'Andy 'Arry. "Hi shall never see hold Hengland again!"

"Well, I will allow it is extremely doubtful if you do," fell coldly from Lightfinger Flip's lips. "This is the last deal in my game at Hot Hole. The place is getting too warm for me, and I shall disappear. But, first I will have my revenge, and I will take my reward with me." Here he cast a look at Nell that made Fred Anthrop's blood boil.

"Truss them up securely, lads," continued the gambler, addressing his satellites. "Then we will march to yonder tree, beneath which the final act in the drama will take place."

With the exception of Nugget Nell every one's hands were secured.

"Where is that negro?" demanded Flip.

No one knew. Pete had mysteriously disappeared.

"Well, let him go," cried the gambler. "We will not have him to bother with."

The three men and the girl were conducted to the tree the card-sharp indicated. Beneath the spreading branches the party halted, and, with a cruel smile on his evil face, Lightfinger Flip said:

"Two of you will never leave this spot. Right here I will settle the score against the tenderfoot who was fool enough to dare to strike me."

"An' thet'll settle my score, too," gritted Whisky Jim, glaring triumphantly at Fred.

"The other," continued Flip, "is the poor fool who came into this part of the country for a purpose he will never accomplish. He has some of my money in his pocket now, but I shall remove it from his dead body."

"Oh, 'eavens mercy!" gasped 'Andy 'Arry, and he would have sunk to the ground but for the support of the ruffians on either side of him.

"As for you," and the gambler turned on Dale, the cowboy, "we shall leave you bound to the trunk of this tree. If your comrades find you, you will be all right. If not, you will make food for the wolves and vultures."

Then he faced Nugget Nell.

"I have taken a fancy to you," he declared; "and I have decided to take you with me into Arizona."

The girl gave him a look of scorn and loathing.

"Do you think God will allow you to triumph?" she cried. "Do you think He will permit you to carry out your vile schemes? No! Retribution will overtake you when you least expect it!"

The gambler snapped his fingers.

"Hang to her, boys," he ordered. "Take her away. She should not witness the execution."

A wild shriek broke from the girl's lips as two of the brutal wretches grasped her, and, with a sudden strength that was amazing, she tore herself from their clutch. Swift as an arrow, she

darted forward and placed herself in front of Fred Anthrop, crying as a knife gleamed in her upraised hand:

"As true as there is a Heaven above us, I will kill the first man who touches me!"

CHAPTER XVII.

THE GAMBLER GETS HIS DUE.

SOMETHING like an enraged tigress she looked at that moment, her red lips exposing her snow-white teeth and her eyes fairly blazing. Never before in all her life had she seemed more beautiful—but it was a sort of beauty that inspired awe.

For several moments not one of the desperate band uttered a word, but mutterings of admiration finally broke from their lips.

"Looker thet!"

"Waal, I sw'ar!"

"She's got claws!"

"But hain't she a jo-daisy?"

A short laugh came from the lips of the gambler.

"An attitude for the mimic stage!" he exclaimed. "You would really make a hit in high tragedy, my dear!"

The defiant girl flashed him a look of scorn and loathing, but did not deign to speak.

"You really look a thousand times more charming than ever before," asserted Flip. "Now I am more than ever taken with you. I am sure you are a prize worth securing, and I know I shall never regret my determination to take you with me when I leave New Mexico."

"You dastardly wretch!" grated Fred Anthropol, his looks plainly indicating his burning desire to fasten his strong hands on the card-sharp's throat.

"I suppose that does cut you a trifle deeply," laughed Flip. "It is plain you covet the prize, but you are the same as out of the game, young man. You sealed your fate when you struck yours truly. I am a man who never forgets or forgives."

Whisky Jim chuckled with fiendish delight.

"I'm goin' ter squar' my score by pullin' on the rope," he jeered. "I reckon you kinder wish you'd never kem inter these yere parts, tenderfut? Oh, we don't hev no use fer sich softies as you thet come roun' tryin' ter tread on ther flaps of our coats!"

Lightfinger Flip made a movement to approach the defiant girl, but she turned her eyes on him in a manner that actually caused the nervy gambler to pause abruptly.

"Now, don't be a fool, child!" he cried, harshly. "Don't you see how silly it is for you to set yourself up against all these men? What will your puny strength avail?"

"You shall see, if you do not keep your distance, villain!" came passionately from her lips. "There is a Just One above who will give me strength to sheathe this knife in your black heart, at least!"

Once more the men murmured in unconscious admiration.

Fred Anthropol made a desperate attempt to burst his bonds.

"Oh, what a fool!" came through his clinched teeth—"what a fool to allow myself tied in this manner!"

"Squarm erway, tenderfut!" laughed Whisky Jim. "It jest duz me good ter see ye! This yere's better ter me then er picnic—it jest am!"

"It's no use, younker," came soberly from Dale's lips. "They hev made ther cords tight an' solid. I reckon it'd take ther strength of ole Samson him own self ter bu'st 'em."

"But are we to be butchered like dogs?"

"Eaven knows hit looks like hit!" moaned the Englishman. "Hi wish Hi 'ad never been born—Hi 'onestly dol! Hit his awful to be 'anged like a criminal, b'Jove! Hi 'ad rather die hof hold hage."

"We cannot waste time here," asserted the gambler. "We must get this job over with and be away."

"Thet's so," agreed Nevada Mike. "Thar hain't no tellin' w'en them thar cowboys will kem whoopin' roun', an' I hain't got no desire ter butt erg'in' them fer some time."

"Beware of Chris Comstock's vengeance!" cried Fred. "W'en he finds our bodies, he will never know what rest is till we are avenged."

Lightfinger Flip sneered:

"What do I care for that stripling! If he follows me into Arizona, he will come to his death. I will trap him and destroy him."

"He will not follow you alone."

"Thet's right," asserted Dale. "He will hev heap plenty of pards who will stick by him ter ther eend."

"And I suppose you will be one of them?"

"You can gamble on it, critter!"

"Then I think we had better string you up with the rest. That will silence you forever, and make one less trailer."

The cowboy's face became hard-set, but he did not quail.

"All right," he said, calmly. "Go ahead with your dirty work. I am not sure but I had rayther go under with ther rest than ter be left out. Ef you let me go, ther boys might think thet I tegged off somehow, an' I'd rayther take my med'cine then ter hev it said I even axed fer my life at your han's!"

Lightfinger Flip scowled blackly.

"Your tongue shall hang you!" he gritted. "If you had possessed common sense, you would have kept still and got off. As it is, the boys will swing you up."

"Hif you hare going to 'ang 'im, Hi don't see why you can't let me hof," faltered 'Andy 'Arry. "You won't make a bloody cent hout hof 'anging me, hany'ow, hand there his no danger hof my hever trailing you hanyw'ere. Hi ham wealthy, hand Hi will make hit han hobject hif you will let me hof."

But the gambler paid no heed to the Englishman's supplication. Once more he started as if to advance on Nugget Nell, and once more she menaced him with the knife.

"You shall die the instant you lay a hand on me!" she cried. "I know how to strike straight at your heart, inhuman wretch!"

"It is useless, Nell," came hopelessly from Fred Anthropol's lips. "You cannot save us alone, and so you may as well leave us to our fate."

Still the brave girl did not relax her defiant attitude.

"If I cannot save you, at least I can die with you," she said.

"Oh, no, no!" laughed Flip. "That would never do! You have suddenly become too valuable in my eyes. I could not think of losing you now, my beauty!"

"You have nothing to lose, for you have not got me yet."

"It will be an easy thing to take you. I will not thrust myself before your knife, so your blow will not touch me. My brave boys will take care of you. I shall be beyond your reach."

"Coward!"

"Hard words never broke any bones. But we can fool no longer. Seize her, men!"

Instantly the desperate maiden changed her tactics, turning the point of the knife toward her own heart.

"As sure as there is a God!" she cried, "I will drive this blade into my heart if one of these men tries to touch me!"

The desperadoes halted irresolutely, looking to their master for instructions. For a moment the gambler seemed baffled and amazed, but he finally opened his lips to speak, when—

With a hoarse shout of joy, a tall figure rushed in among the gang of ruffians, scattering them to the right and left with the sweeps of two powerful arms.

"I have found you once again, you dastard! Ha! ha!"

Lightfinger Flip fell back with an oath of dismay, for he was confronted by Old Rattlebrain. The maniac's eyes blazed with a fire that filled the card-sharp's heart with a sudden terror.

"The time of the end has come!" shouted the strange man. "Prepare to die, miserable wretch!"

"Keep off!" cried the gambler, nervously drawing a knife. "Shoot the crazy fool down, pards!"

But before this order could be obeyed, one of the ruffians shouted:

"Hyer come ther cowboys!"

He was right. Chris Comstock and his friends swept into view and came dashing toward the tree, uttering wild yells of satisfaction.

Lightfinger Flip's men were seized by terror and made a dash for their horses, flinging themselves on the animals' backs and lashing them into a wild gallop.

The card-sharp would have done the same, but Old Rattlebrain darted forward and seized the wretch in his grasp.

"Satan is waiting for you!" hissed the maniac.

Flip struck at his mad foe, but the knife inflicted nothing more than a simple wound. Then Old Rattlebrain bore the trapped gambler to the ground, and it happened that the desperate villain fell upon his own knife.

The cowboys did not pursue the fleeing desperadoes. Lightfinger Flip was the man they were after, and they halted at the tree.

The doomed gambler was lying on the ground,

gasping for breath, while Old Rattlebrain crouched beside him, looking puzzled and dazed.

Pete, the darky, suddenly appeared on the scene and assisted Nugget Nell in releasing the three men who had been Lightfinger Flip's captives a few moments before.

The tables had been turned in a sudden and remarkable manner.

"Good fortune has favored us," declared Chris Comstock. "We struck the trail of our game and run it down in a short time. But, the gambler is cut."

"I have got my death-wound," gasped Flip, as the young cowboy bent over him. "The cards ran against me in the final deal. I am going to pass out of the game."

'Andy 'Arry touched the wounded wretch on the shoulder, saying:

"Baltimore Jack, I arrest you for the murder of Ichabod Spiles."

"You are too late, you cursed bound of the law!" came faintly from the gambler's lips. "I suspected you were not an Englishman, and that was why I intended to put you out of the way. You are Detective Walt Rey?"

"I am."

"Well, you are baffled this time."

"Do you confess you killed the old miser Spiles? Your accomplice says you struck the fatal blow."

"It is true; I killed the man."

"Thank Heaven!" broke fervently from Fred Anthropol's lips. "That confession clears away the black shadow that has hung over my head. I can now look the world in the face once more."

Old Rattlebrain suddenly clutched the card-sharp by the shoulder, crying excitedly:

"You are dying, but you must not die and take my secret with you! You remember me! It was on a Mississippi River boat. I was returning home with a fortune in my pocket. I drank with you—you induced me into a game of cards. The liquor muddled my brain. I told you my name. You won my money till it came to the last pot. That was a big one. I won that. You cried: 'Foul play!' and shot me down. Do you remember, man—do you remember?"

"Yes, I remember."

"You left me for dead, but I did not die. I recovered, but from that day I have never been able to recall my name or tell where my home is. I told you my name. You must remember it! For God's sake tell me, man, what is my name!"

"It is Rodney Welland."

A cry broke from Nugget Nell's lips. She sprung toward the old man, exclaiming:

"My father—you are my father!"

"Lightfinger Flip" rests in an unmarked grave beneath the tree where retribution overtook him. Although he was triumphant for a time, his sinful schemes came to naught in the end and he received his merited due.

In Rodney Welland Nell had indeed found the father she was searching for, although it was difficult for the old man to realize she was his child. He did not immediately recover from his occasional wild spells, but it was hoped he would do so in time.

Detective Rey, Fred Anthropol, Pete, Rodney Welland and his daughter accompanied the cowboys on their return to the Robinson Ranch, where they were cordially received, although the news of poor Jimson's fate cast a shadow of sadness over the place.

"As w'ite er boy as ever dored breath!" declared Round-up Rube. "Next to Chris, I thought ther most o' pore Jim. But, ther p'ison whelp w'at wiped him out hes gone ter roast fer it."

Both Fred and Chris were very attentive to Nell, but it soon became plain to the young cowboy that his former schoolmate held the "inside track." When Fred told Chris he had succeeded in obtaining a confession of love from the girl's lips, the cowboy held out his hand, frankly.

"You have won a prize, Fred," he declared, bravely repressing his own feelings. "I am sure Nell is a noble girl. She will fill your life with sunshine."

THE END.

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